

HEARTS IMPORTUNATE

by
Evelyn Dickinson



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CHAPTER I

It was a spring afternoon in New South Wales—a so-called “spring” in a lean year, when the movement (if movement there were any) of the vexed and tormented earth was backward rather than forward. The old dry grass stood sparse and bleached in soil that was scorched by the sun and the frost of rainless years, and showed no shoot of vernal green; and the unchanging hoary-hued gums seemed older even than their wont, more metallic, more remotely prehistoric. The wide flats of Bur-rabindar sheep-run lay iron-bound in the grip of drought.

The sun fell toward the land-line, as it falls night after night in weeks and months of cloudless Australian weather, through depths of rose and prim-rose, and the hills that lay eastward—rocky, thinly-grown with eucalyptus—caught the splendid glow of the west, and gave it back with lesser warmth. A man came riding slowly through the paddocks, facing the light. He leaned down from his saddle to draw back the bolt of a gate, which refused to act. He dismounted, fastened the horse, and set to work in rectification with a pocket-knife. This done, he walked along with his hand on the bridle

and his eye searching everywhere, that nothing might escape notice which a squatter needs to note. Ralph Hazell was newly-born as squatter—three months only of age—with no trained sub-consciousness to ease his undertaking. He was a tall man, with fine shoulders and an admirable length and proportion of limb; he held himself well, so that a certain stoutness, which was so far deplorable rather as a prophecy than a fact, did not mar the dignity and manliness of his figure. He wore a short pointed beard, dark-brown and lustrous, and under his strong brows his pale-blue eyes were clear and penetrating.

A group of buildings came in sight a quarter of a mile distant among the trees, and his way lay toward them, with an indifferent look upon the western sky, as of one already dull to its evening custom of magnificence. Suddenly, from the bare bough of a near gum-tree, a pair of chubby jackasses burst into immoderate, wild laughter, and, filling the air with a violent duet of guffaw and chuckle, they mocked the sun in its going, as they had mocked it in its coming. “Hō-hō-hō-hō, hā-hā-hā-hā! hō-hō-hō-hō, hā-hā-hā-hā! br-r-r—r-r-r!” shrieked the birds, repeating several times their hideous utterance, with each other and against each other, with odd guttural interspersions, the whole effect hoarse, hysterical, harsh; an effect as of crude mechanical cries, as of the clang of an inferior bell, yet dry and short as breaking wood, which leaves no wave within the ear; in a high degree derisive, yet entirely unmirthful. The squatter stood listening at-

tentively. It was his habit to time his home-coming, that if possible it might meet their song, for his heart was as full of bitterness as the Dead Sea, and his brain fermented with swarming moments of self-contempt and heavenward rage. So that, sore and weak to boyishness, his soul was soothed by the concert of defiance. The discord ended in guttural sobs, and the birds, the incredible authors of it, sat at peace upon their bough. In the silence which followed, the long-drawn, melancholy "A-a-ah!" of a carrion-crow lamented that the world should be of such a sort. Hazell, with his arm through the reins, moved toward the homestead. Full in the rays of the setting sun, a lady sat on horseback, looking at him; her hat hung at her side, her head was crowned with a glory of rippling and coiling gold, on which the ruddy light fell, reddening, burnishing, till it glowed as though the very wine of life ran through it. Hazell caught his breath sharply; after the desolation of sound, such royal abundance of colour was like a blow upon his nerves, and, having struck, it held him like a spell. So for a moment he was transfixed, staring, till the habit of civility asserted itself, and he remembered that he was on his own ground, where she, however unapproachably brilliant, was guest. In response to his hurried and clumsy, salute, she made inquiry, the explanation brief, neat, polite, in the way of good English speech:

"Is there any one in the house, do you know, from whom I could beg a cup of tea? I have had a long ride—longer than I intended."

Her voice restored his self-command.

"I hope," he answered, "that some one awaits my own needs. But however that may be, you are welcome to whatever can be found there."

"I am afraid you are the new master of Burra-bindar."

"I believe I am. But why afraid?"

"Because I am a trespasser—if there is such a thing as trespass in the Bush."

"As the youngest and the least of Bushmen, I assure you there is no such thing. Besides—" He hesitated. He wished to give effect to his thought that the coldest of front-doors—an Edinburgh front-door—would open cordially to so glad a presence; but the restraint of her fine features guarded their beauty from the vulgar assault of compliment. "Please come in," he concluded.

The wide wooden verandah of the house was empty of all but a hammock and a canvas water-bag; not even a chair offered invitation. The centre door stood open, but black—the windows were dull with blinds. The deadness of it gave the visitor pause, for there is question of man and woman even when hospitality admits no doubt.

"Really, I don't know," she said. "Why should I trouble you?"

He read her mind, and answered it.

"My housekeeper loves a new face," he urged.

"A drink from the creek would do for me very nearly as well," she replied. But she yielded, and rode on, explaining: "I knew the former people of this station, and have often been here before. I was

aware that they were to leave it, of course, but I did not realise, until I saw you, that you were already in their place."

"Only a fortnight," he said.

It was easy for him to fall a little behind, and his bewilderment at her appearing sank into wonder, and thence to pleasure that her face and form were not unworthy the magical crown of hair. The ivory paleness of her cheek took its tone harmoniously from the gold which set it, the vigour of her splendid growth showed in her grip upon the saddle, and its suppleness in the play of her hand upon the reins. Watching her in three-quarter profile, he called her, in his mind, superb, a demi-goddess, and in his memory of the moment, while life retained it, he saw her always as a radiant contrast in the grey-green Bush, somewhat as he had seen the great white orb of Venus when she hung low in the grey-blue tropical night.

"You are no stranger to these parts, I see," he said, smiling. "You make for the back entrance as straight as a swagsman."

She assented inaudibly, ignoring his question.

There were extensive out-buildings, and a Chinaman was at work in an acre of vegetable garden. The enclosing fires of the outside oven smoked thinly, and one could see the beams of an open shed, thick with roosting fowls. No human being, except the yellow gardener, was in sight. Hazell shouted several names, but no one answered, and he turned to his companion, laughing through annoyance.

"Would you believe," he asked her, "that I have a housekeeper, an underling girl, and a stableman, to my sole service, and that this is nearly my dinner hour? I am much minded to cashier the lot of them."

"Don't, if I may advise. Domestic help cometh from afar in the Bush. Some diverting trifle has drawn them off, either up the creek or down the creek—you know how we measure direction. They will reappear in moderately good time, I don't say properly repentant, but serviceable once more."

"Meanwhile, will you not get down?"

He laid a detaining hand on the bridle of her mare. His manner was alert, easy—the entirely impersonal manner of the modern Englishman of the world, who, as it were, puts at the command of the person he wishes to oblige, himself, a well-oiled and ingenious machine, which asks no questions, and takes no notice, is merely clever and obedient. But Hazell's was a personality full of force, which convention might train and veil without in any way abating. His companion felt the stir, the insistence of his magnetism, and whether or not it was purposely directed toward herself, she resisted it.

"I would rather stay here. You will have to grope your way to the water-bottle. I refuse to break my neck in unknown territory."

"You won't vanish while I am away on your service?"

"No. I am too thirsty."

He disappeared into the black doorway, leaving his horse to stand. The short, sub-tropical twilight

was on the land, and the look of the house, dark with its shading verandahs, was that of unrelieved night. A bull-frog croaked raucously in the still air. The eastern sky showed the flush of the rising moon. Footsteps sounded near, and a lean, mean-looking little man, soiled from Bush-tramping, carrying billy and swag, came in the guidance of the Chinese gardener, and they placed themselves decorously a few yards away, the celestial looking at her with smiles. She greeted him by name—Soy Ching—and he asked, on behalf of his companion, if the master were in.

As a goddess might present herself to one of inferior race, she replied friendly, adding that it must be satisfactory nowadays to be free from children tramping over the beds.

"Velly ni', chillen," he answered equably.

"And velly ni', no chillen?"

"Allee same, velly ni', Missie Fletchee."

"Everything all the same to you, Soy Ching, wise man that you are."

The dusty tramp, who from the moment of seeing the rider had stared intently, as though fascinated, started forward and peered yet more keenly on hearing her name as rendered in pigeon, and she made a shield for herself against the annoyance by putting on the sailor-hat which hung from her arm.

The master appeared at the house-door, and alleged his doings in a cheerful voice.

"There is an excellent fire in my sitting-room," he said, "and the kettle is alive with bubbles, and

my tea, I assure you, is something specially good." Then, perceiving the men, his tones changed to that of military question. "What do you want, Soy Ching? Is this a mate of yours?"

"He say he water mollow morning; tucker to-nigh'," replied the Chinaman sweetly.

"How do I know what he will do to-morrow? I don't want sundowners on my place."

The tramp came forward with plausible and fluent speech.

"Sundowner? 'Ow, in Gawd's name, sir, 's a man to foller any other trade in such a season has this? Everything's that burnt up, there's no chance. They turned me orf my last job, down the Lachlan, becos there was nothing left to do on the river but wait for death an' blue ruin."

Hazell eyed the speaker's ferret features without sympathy.

"Thanks, I need no story," he said, and turned impatiently to Soy Ching. "If you really want help, you must see to him. Tell Mrs. Brock, when she comes back, that he is to have some tucker, and get his tucker's worth of watering out of him in the morning. I think"—the squatter reverted to his guest in his former voice—"that kettle must be boiling over, and you know you must really wait for the moon now."

"I asked only for a drink of water. Well, I yield," she said reluctantly; and evading his hand, she dropped lightly from the saddle.

Hazell signed to the Chinaman to look to the horses, while the tramp stood still staring at the

lady, and even rounded quickly to follow her with his eyes as she went before the master into the house. She walked, thought her host, with the true goddess step, and he noted further that, after what had probably been a long time in the saddle, there was no stiffness in her movements. Having at length accepted his invitation, moreover, there was no affectation of hesitation, for she went without direction into the large room on the right of the central passage. He had lighted a lamp, and fanned the log-fire to brightness with the big bellows which lay on the hearth; a small square table was set for a solitary diner, and at one corner, for the visitor's use, he had put a great cup and saucer. He pushed forward a spacious armchair in shabby leather, from whence she watched him and his surroundings with the fresh, unfatigued perception of one who lives much among familiar things. Evidently the room was the general living-place of a lonely man, who used it for most purposes. It was orderly, but all things were ugly, and she recognised various articles of furniture, old and worn, as having belonged to the former family. A second table, long and solid, stood between the windows piled with newspapers, mainly unopened, the postal harvest of months. An old-fashioned writing-bureau occupied a recess on one side of the chimney. The glass of its upper cupboard was broken, and the books behind were crowded in disarray upon the shelves. The mantelpiece was packed with cigar-boxes, and littered with pipes. A couple of swords in scabbards, crossed with a couple of rifles, were the only

ornament of the walls, and gun-cases, fishing-rods, riding-whips—the usual accessories of a sportsman—stood in the angles, and lay about the floor. A worn square of carpet, and a few cane-seated chairs, completed the inventory.

Hazell prepared tea and bread-and-butter for his visitor, quick and careful, without speaking. Evidently he was of those who give their whole attention to the thing in hand. His visitor noted the determination of his expression, the thinness of his hair about the brows and crown, his heavy wedding-ring. The service complete, he seated himself opposite.

“What am I drinking? Young Hyson? Imperial tips? Something surely very costly?” she asked, as she sipped slowly.

“Something I import myself—something whose name and source I give to no one. I am consistently selfish; if I care for anything, I keep it to myself. Are you sure this is all I can do for you?”

“More than enough. I asked for water, and you give me tea and bread-and-butter in a dish that is quite sufficiently lordly.”

“Diana softens,” thought Hazell, with some relief of mind. “Is she perhaps really rather Helen?” He ventured a question: “Have you far to go?”

“Fourteen miles or so.”

“Alone?”

“I hope so. Oh, I know the road!”

“And I am to eat my dinner comfortably, and think of you cantering lonely through the Bush?”

"There is no need for you to think of me at all."

Her voice was expressive as well as clear. Hazell bowed stiffly, for it was suddenly colder; and, as though she recognised her own ungraciousness, she added:

"I live at Wamagatta, Mr. Hazell. My name is Fletcher. We shall probably meet some day, when you come to call on Mrs. Bolitho."

He bowed again.

"I know the name of Bolitho of Wamagatta," he answered; "but I do not intend to pay visits of ceremony, and there is certainly little to attract visitors of ceremony to these quarters of mine."

He put out a hand to emphasise the ugliness of his surroundings; the firelight shone on his wedding-ring.

"You might, I allow, be of a less sternly utilitarian appearance; but your wife, perhaps——"

"My wife! I have no wife!" he interrupted her, so loud, so violent, that she looked at him in amazement, and silence fell upon them.

The harshness and passion of his face froze apology at its conception, and it is surely barbaric to roar one's resentment for an unwitting touch upon however sore a wound.

She moved as if to leave the chair; her strange host recovered himself with a pang of shame, and his voice was warmly cordial as he interposed:

"Don't stir yet, I beg of you. The moon is still worthless, and in this half-and-half sort of light riding is not very safe."

"I am used to the Bush in all lights, and at all seasons."

"I cannot say as much; but in a year or two, if I stick to the saddle as I have been doing lately—Do you like the Bush, Miss Fletcher?"

"For many reasons, I love it."

"The pungent, tonic smell of it?" he suggested.

"Yes, and its great extent, and its glorious loneliness—no towns, no human beings; its exquisite cleanliness. I think it must be the *cleanest* place in the world—sun-dried, wind-swept."

There was enthusiasm in her words. He saw it, wondering; but for the second time he felt it impossible to offer her flattering speech on his own ground, in his own house, and in a matter-of-fact way he commented:

"I should have expected towns and human beings to possess charm for you."

"I hate them. It is rarely—as, for instance, when I ride too far, and am in need of refreshment—that I can see any good in strangers."

"And the world—so many millions, you know—must be chiefly strangers, however large your circle."

"Mine is particularly small; but has one not a right to one's own individuality? I am at least consistent; being without desire for what is called ordinary society, I live in the Australian Bush."

"You are a strong individualist?"

"I think I am."

"Then, pardon me if I make a request of you. Take off your hat again just for a moment."

"Why, Mr. Hazell?"

"Don't be annoyed with me; I mean no offence—I ask it with all respect. Please take off your hat."

"But—" Miss Fletcher hesitated; his tones, his attitude, were indeed entirely respectful. "I fail to see why I should do so," she concluded.

"Because, if you like, I want payment for my tea. We are not friends; you dislike strangers—I avoid them. Consider this house an inn; I want payment for my tea—payment in gold."

"It is much too dear. Silver would be ample."

"You cannot judge; that is very special tea. The Tsar himself would be glad to drink it; it is worth guineas by the pound."

"But my consumption was of such a tiny fraction of a pound."

She was laughing; he waved his own arguments aside.

"I urge no more; you are too keen for me. I throw myself on your charity. The position, I own, is preposterous; but of whom may one ask the preposterous, if not of an individualist? To give a stranger pleasure, please take off your hat."

His personality was strong upon her as he stood before her, and, though absurd, his request was harmless, and his manner made it decently colourless. She complied, rising to her feet as she did so, and turning toward the door as if to show that the inspection must be brief. Firelight and lamplight fell on the magnificent masses of her hair, and the rich pagan glow of it filled his brain and stirred his pulses as wine would do. He drew a deep breath,

as though he inhaled its brilliance, then followed her quickly.

"You are right; I am overpaid," he said. "I offer you something by way of change—a pair of Albanian pig-tusks, an ounce of the precious tea? There is so little of mine that has any exchange value."

Soy Ching waited in the moonlight attendant on the drooping horses. The air was keen and cold, and there was a sparkle on grass and trees.

"Frost again," said the squatter. "How long may one expect it in these parts?"

"You may expect anything you like. There are no clear limits to the seasons in this country. It may rain every day for three months, or the heavens may be as brass for three years. Do you pray for rain in your religion, Soy Ching? If so, you should pray now; you will have no garden left by the summer."

The man smiled as usual. Miss Fletcher took the mare from him, and led her aside to a small heap of wood; the docile creature stood while her mistress, with the skill of much practice, sprang into the saddle and settled herself there, closely as a hand to its glove. Hazell looked on, admiring.

"You need no help of mortal, I see," he said; "but, still, may I not at least come with you to the end of the run?"

"Four miles, I think? Certainly not. Good-bye, and many thanks."

As she rounded toward the moonlight in the creek, she caught sight of the meagre figure of the

sundowner, who lolled against the shed where the fowls roosted, and watched her. Was there a grin about his face? It was a wretched little face, with small eyes, near-set to a long narrow nose—a detestable, peering, inquisitive face. She touched the mare with her heel, and started her on a smart trot across the bed of the low stream, among the gleaming trunks of the gum-trees. Roused by the ring of hoofs on a stony spot, a jackass sleeping on a bough was stirred to laughter, and as Miss Fletcher sped away, and Hazell stood observing her, the lonely grey-green Bush was waked by the familiar mockery: “Hō-hō-hō-hō, hā-hă-hā-hă! hō-hō-hō-hō, hā-hă-hā-hă! br-r-r—r-r-r!”

CHAPTER II

THE Beulah district—lying for many miles round the post-town from which it took name—was genuinely interested and concerned to hear of the death of Emily Fagan (by reason of which the master of Burrabindar had been unattended and waiting for his dinner). The girl's story had been highly romantic, and her end was such as to command a common regret. She was the only child of Peter Proudfoot, who kept the largest general store in Beulah, and had grown wealthy upon it. He was by birth of a singularly concentrated temperament, which had been heightened by the circumstances of his breeding, for he had been born a native of the most exclusive county in Scotland, and trained in the extreme rigidity of the Free Church. Compulsion of the usual kind—to make a living—had led to his establishment in Australia, where he married, unequally, a lively girl of the soil; but he continued primarily a citizen of Killinot and a member of the Disruption. His wife died young. The unmarried women of Beulah and the district had been deeply moved by the forlorn state of baby Emily. But Peter Proudfoot's widowhood had been unsailable, and truly the child lacked little, for his fatherhood was as concentrated as the rest of him. As she grew, the neighbourhood delighted to see her winsome smile and her yellow ringlets, alive and

running over with life, among the unromantic detail of the store ; and when it was discerned later that she possessed a singing-voice of notable strength and sweetness, all those whose position placed them above envy were anxious that this should be thoroughly cultivated, for the glory of Australia and the pleasure of the world. Mrs. Bolitho of Wamagatta in particular made a personal request and proposal to Peter Proudfoot ; if he would suffer the child to begin her musical training in Sydney, she herself would defray the cost of a finishing trip to Europe. But song, and the platform, and the devil-tempted career of the artist, were utterly repugnant to him, even had they not necessitated the loss of his dear one's society. His consent was not to be had, and except at a rare local concert, in some ballad of the moment, or at Sunday-worship, in the poor melody of the metrical psalms, the world was none the happier for her rich gift. It was well known how one bad night, driving through the street, Miss Fletcher had stopped her horses a long time to hear Emily singing Scotch songs to her father in the verandah, how, at length, she had left the carriage and gone impetuously to tell him that such a voice was no private property, either of his or hers ; that to withhold it from the ears and hearts of their fellow-creatures was no less than an irreparable wrong. Proudfoot had replied firmly in the manner of his particular biblical eclecticism, and Miss Fletcher had lost her temper. Nothing on earth was so selfish, so utterly and irresponsibly selfish, she told him, as a selfish father ; no sins so

certainly went home to roost as those of parents to their children. Then she drove off at a great pace, and the dark verandah had given no sign for the edification of the curious loafers in the dark street.

The following summer Proudfoot sat alone in his darkness, and Emily, immeasurably distant by twenty miles, sang to her husband at the door of their two-roomed hut. She had, on the whole, been indifferent about her proposed musical training; the applause of crowded opera-houses and diamond presentations from Emperors were attractive but remote, and to be won in any case by long and wearisome study. Now, here in Beulah there was the flowing interest of the shop, and the admiration of the local youth, most admiring of whom was Laurence Fagan, and most dangerous; for he consummated his Irish charm of face, figure, and tongue by his unrelieved ineligibility as a poor papistical boundary-rider on the station of Mr. Snowe of Burrabin-dar, and in *his* connection Emily was not indifferent.

Again Peter Proudfoot said "No," and seemed to consider the matter closed; but pairing takes precedence of parentage, and Emily, with her lover's help, arranged for herself a convenient absence in the direction of Sydney, and returned from it, ready to be forgiven, in the name of Fagan. The Beulah district, which loved the girl, and, like all districts, loved romance, looked for the reconciliation which would surely come—at least, with the end of the year; but there was a sudden onset of illness, violent and short. No nurse or medical aid was nearer than sixteen miles; convulsion had followed con-

vulsion unchecked, and the poor premature baby had given no cry, and the racked and tormented mother found rest only in death. Ralph Hazell had seen the girl more than once as he rode his rounds, and he regretted the cruel quenching of so blithe a spark of life; with civil intention, therefore, he rode to the burial, on the afternoon of the second day following Miss Fletcher's visit.

On the stony hillside, drenched with unclouded sunlight, now, even in the springtime, almost bare of grass, and strewn with the dry, dead litter of boughs, leaves, tree-trunks, among which sparsely grew the gaunt colourless gums, stood about fifty people, unheroic figures, in the awkward attitudes of Britons on occasions of emotion, in the ugly clothing of our custom. Never, probably, from the beginning of things, had so large a crowd of human beings assembled there, unless it had been of black-fellows in corroboree, who, indeed, except that from habit the eye expects an utter solitude in the Bush, would have been harmonious with its wildness. All round, at varying distances, horses and vehicles stood awaiting their owners, storekeepers' wives from Beulah, in garb of countrified mourning. The parched selectors with their wives and families arrived by the cartful from remote places, wearing their everyday garments, mostly of print, faded by washing from the bright colours preferred in bright lands. A score of unconnected men, boundary-riders, stockmen, station hands, a miner or two, in leather gaiters and shabby tweed jackets, lounged about, wearing their soft hats, keeping an ashamed

eye on the centre of the group, the rough-cut grave. Across this, on a hurdle, lay a pine coffin, smothered in splendid violets and boughs of golden wattle. Here, in an accent of Ulster, not without emotion, the Presbyterian minister spoke and prayed earnestly, and Larry Fagan, thrown at full length upon the stony soil, wept and sobbed without control. Gradually the whole company present seemed absorbed in watching him, drawn from their own sensibility to the easier and less painful observation of his, so that sorrow was displaced by sympathy. Hazell noticed this, in his shrewd way, and addressed the dead girl mentally: "Positively your last appearance on the public stage, Emily. The concern of the living is with the living—pass on!" He smiled bitterly as he thought thus, and doing so, as though a wave of feeling had welled against his nerves and compelled him to recognise it and follow the line of it, he looked across the grass and saw Miss Fletcher. She was dressed for riding, in a black habit; her hair gleamed through the darkness of the veil which hid her head and face. Her eyes were directly upon his, and he knew that she had seen his smile and resented it. A little elderly lady leant upon her arm. The service ended, and the audience scattered slowly, with lingering, doubtful glances at the grave and the widower, whom, it seemed, they left to the minister, as best fitted to deal with the unconventional. A station-hand, acting as sexton, came forward with his spade, stared at the flowers, and referred his perplexity also to the minister.

"Be I to earth in these pretty blooms, sir? I call to mind a buryin' I 'tended River End way: the posies was laid atop, a finishin' to the mound, like, and it took my fancy greatly."

The voice in which he spoke was peculiarly shrill and grating, being the intended modification of its ordinary tone to the compliment of a whisper. It reached Larry's ears with irritating effect, and raising his spoiled, swollen face, by one swift movement he jerked himself, turning on his arm, into the grave, and crying out, "Do as ye please—the way ye earth me in wid her!" he fell on the coffin among the flowers, and lay clutching the irresponsive wooden walls. The air was pierced with his resonant woeful keen.

The sexton scratched his head; the minister pleaded soothingly: "Fagan, my dear brother, it is the Lord's will; submit yourself to Him. Himself hath done it."

The mourners, arrested on their way, and in their arranging of reins and traces, gazed back with a thrill of interest. Hazell, his eyebrows raised, tapped his boot with his whip. Miss Fletcher shivered and moved as if to hurry to where a groom in plain clothes held her horse. The elderly lady detained her.

"I am the oldest person here, let me speak to him," she exclaimed; and leaning on her companion's arm, she limped slowly to seat herself on the upturned gravel, just above the distracted figure. "Leave me for a moment, my dear."

Seizing the instant, Hazell stepped quickly to

meet Miss Fletcher as she drew away. He felt that she wished to avoid him, but as though his feet of their own accord took him to her, his mind being unwilling, he planted himself before her, raised his hat, and found nothing to say, except, after hesitation, and vaguely :

“This is a sad scene.”

“It seemed to me that you were so fortunate as to find amusement in it,” she answered coldly.

“I feared you would see and misunderstand,” he replied eagerly, as though it were now his tongue which ran away with him. “I confess I smiled, but it was at my thoughts. I often laugh to myself at the irony of life. It seems the only thing to do.”

“Men may laugh, but women must weep,” was the dry response.

“I beg your pardon ; that is by no means invariable. There are many women who laugh while men—well, while men go heart-broken—I know it.”

Her temper took fire at the sudden flicker of his, and she answered warmly : “That is not my experience. To go no further, think of the story before us to-day.”

“I hear a man weeping, at all events.”

“Yes, and you will hear his wedding-bells a few months hence. I know his kind. The louder they lament, the sooner they rejoice.”

“Unfair—a mere statement !” Hazell replied angrily.

Miss Fletcher turned upon him, looking straight into his eyes.

"Emily Fagan's whole being was sacrificed to the selfishness of men," she answered, speaking slowly, as if to steady her voice. "The girl was a born artist. She sang as the birds sing, as the morning stars sing, and the most joyous, the only proper life for her would have been to sing for the whole world. Her father, masking his selfish need of her in a cloak of his petty Puritan prejudice, forbade it. That fathers in our, as we call them, *free* days should have such powers! He disapproved—*he disapproved!* Who are you or I, what was he or any other individual, to approve or disapprove—to dispose finally of a human being's life?" She paused, as if her thoughts came too thick for speech.

"The girl disposed of herself in her marriage, from what I hear," said Hazell quickly.

"Does any girl, inexperienced, swayed on the uncomprehended waves of blind feeling, dispose of herself? You might as well say the raindrops dispose of themselves, when they trickle down guiding ways to the river and are borne to the sea. This young man, who indulges his grief to-day as he indulged his love yesterday, urged and coaxed, and besought and practically compelled her to marry him. He had nothing to give her but himself and his two-roomed shanty, and the absorbing interest of making ends meet on thirteen shillings a week, minus his beer-money; whereas she had been accustomed to all the comforts of her comfort-loving class, and all the diversion of the little town. But that naturally would not strike him."

"Love levels all things," interrupted Hazell; "that is always conceded."

"It does not, unfortunately, level a taste for drink," replied Miss Fletcher. "It did not prevent Larry Fagan from enjoying himself in Beulah one Saturday a couple of months ago, so that when he came to drive Emily home again, road, rut, stump, creek were all very much the same to his convivial eye, and by and by the cart was upset, and Emily was bruised and shaken, and there—*there* is her grave!"

Miss Fletcher spoke in an undertone, because of the nearness of the man she condemned, but never had Hazell heard such passion in a woman's voice; her face, too, pale, and with features sharpened, seemed through her veil to burn with flame. She concluded bitterly:

"But all who know the story are full of pity for the widower, and they find it rather an added pleasing excitement of their nerves that the guilty father sits to-day at the receipt of custom as usual, with unmoved face, as though he had never had, nor ever ruined, a daughter. Oh, a splendid story! It might almost make a play! Will you not smile again, Mr. Hazell, at what you are pleased to call the irony of life?"

"As neither you nor I are responsible, and neither you nor I can help, I think it is better to smile as I do, than to bay the heavens as you do."

"A man, I notice, can always compound for his own sins, past, present, or future, by amiable tolerance of the sins of other men."

"Have women no sins?"

"I dare say, but I seem scarcely to see them; my horizon is darkened by the mountainous pile of men's."

"Is that so? I dare say it is big enough, but as you sneer at me, Miss Fletcher, because I have the misfortune to be a man, I will, with your permission, smile at you ——"

"Because I am a woman?"

"No," snarled Hazell through his teeth; "but because, whereas your horizon is darkened by a theoretical impersonal wickedness of all men to all women, my whole noontide is for evermore black with the practical treachery of one woman to me!"

"What do you know of my experience?" Miss Fletcher asked him abruptly; and then, through his own disturbance and preoccupation, he saw that she checked herself, and froze into rigidity, as if she were struck by sudden pain.

Halting, irregular steps broke the silence that followed as they turned together to see the little elderly lady, leaning on her stick, limping toward them.

"Avis, my dear, will you give me your arm?" she asked briskly, and winked away a tear from her eyelid, and put on a pleasant worldly manner as she added: "Surely this gentleman must be Mr. Hazell?"

CHAPTER III

“ONCE more I deplore my own gregariousness, and repent in mental sackcloth! Not three weeks settled here, on the extreme tail-hairs of civilisation, and I find myself promised to visit neighbours. It needn’t, however, be done.”

So Hazell reflected as he sat in his sitting-room at half-past six in the morning, polishing his favourite gun. He was an early riser: India had made him so, he said; but he did not wish to be exacting to his household. By means of a spirit-lamp he could make himself a great cup of tea, wherewith to enjoy his first pipe; and he liked to spend a quiet hour or two cleaning and mending his sporting tackle, looking to his dogs and horses, and occupying himself generally with dirty and interesting work of an Englishmanly kind. About seven o’clock he expected to be supplied with a firkin or so of boiling water (for India had made him chilly) with which to remove the traces of his toil, and then came breakfast; and then the long solitary riding, which seemed, when he thought of the future, to fill the whole vista of his life.

Mrs. Brock, who had kept squatters’ houses before this, considered that he had strange ways. The early rising she could understand—there are hardy dwellers in the Bush who begin their day at four of the clock—and daily hot water, though inconvenient,

he had a right to demand, for his pay was good ; but that a lonely man on the Mia-Mia Plains should dine every night in a velvet coat, black trousers and pumps, that he should sleep in the afternoon, and sit up till one or two every morning, these things were unnatural and un-Bush-like. But it was known quite certainly, though it would have been difficult to say how, that he had been a soldier, and among the crash of authorities there abides—at all events in domestic things—that of arms ; and further, his temper was hot, though his judgment was just ; and, finally, he was eminently a masterful man, whose servant must obey, or serve elsewhere. So Hazell settled down in his own fashion, composed of England and India and individual, to works and days at Burrabindar.

A triumphant hen appeared in the verandah, striding and darting her head in the zigzag course of her species, clucking hideously. “ An egg, I suppose,” thought Hazell ; and it occurred to him to seek and secure it, for he liked eggs ; and though he had taken over, with the rest of the live stock of the station, an abundance of poultry, nothing had come by reason of them so far, except an enormous sack of maize from Peter Proudfoot. The morning was delightful, as far as atmosphere could make it so. The newly-risen sun, clear as crystal, struck straight upon the frost, and the ground glistened, and the gum-trees, and the bare boughs of the fine mulberry-tree at the side of the house, and the deep bed of violets, rich with bloom, which ran round the edges of the verandah. The tall, strong figure of the pro-

prietor, erect and impressive, even in the ugliness of gaiters, knickerbockers, jersey, and coat, all of the thickest, oldest, and most worn, oil-stained, mud-stained, and frayed, stood a moment without the open French window, surveying what had once been a garden, which he intended should be a garden again. The land proximate to the house was neglected and barren, till it hardly differed from the flats of the run; the flowers and flowering trees of it had died away to no more than the bed of violets, a few belated roses, and a straggling oleander. The ground was dry, burnt by heat and cold, grassless, obstinate-looking—never anywhere was there less promise of a gracious and tender vegetation; but from some care in watering, and the shelter of their place, the violets were superb. Straw had been put about the roots of the roses, and the coming spring and summer should be given to trenching and planting; and failing the rain, so much desired, so long due, the earth should be tapped at whatever cost for her hidden supplies. Hazell was resolved upon perfection in every part of his estate. Surely the whole energy, the whole determination, of a brave man might do this!

The egg lay in the straw under the rose-bushes. It was pocketed, and the squatter walked to the back of his premises to survey the hens. "A good hundred of them, and not another of the pack, I dare say, doing her duty," he told himself, and concluded that he did not understand fowls. Such a supply of maize and pollard, such an extent of run, such a pother of pecking and clucking and hurrying,

and never an egg for his breakfast. Mrs. Brock was so entirely in externals what a mature widow should be, that her interior was no doubt suitably wise and skilful, and above error as above speculation. Yet Hazell knew that one should beware of widows. It might be well to write to Sydney for the standard book on poultry-keeping, for the master should know every detail of all that concerns him. Yet the advice of some practical person is surely, in all circumstances, the best value: one can question, and get replies. Mrs. Bolitho, for instance, an intelligent and vivacious woman of long experience, probably knew everything to be known about fowls. Hazell frowned, and shook his head impatiently, angry to find himself on the verge of temptation. He poked about the wood-heap on the chance of discovering another egg, then made his way to the kitchen-garden, where Soy Ching was watering. The industrious creature was alone, and, in his native way, carried a large can on each end of a long thin pole, which lay across his shoulders, thus, bending forward, he poured a double stream upon the rows of vegetables. His master watched him a moment, then recollecting, called:

“Where’s your mate? Is he taking a holiday?”

As though warned of his employer’s habits, and waiting for inspection, the mate, the ferret-faced tramp, came from behind an out-house, where he stood basking in the sun, and advanced full of words:

“My intentions is quite straight, sir; but a ’oliday is forced upon me, for ’ow kin a man work, sir,

when 'is 'ands is all disabled with Bathurst burrs ? It's work I desire, and am ready for ; but where I come from last week, where I was doin' a bit o' shearin', the fleece is alive with burrs, and I 'ad to give 'em best, I 'ad, with my pore 'ands real terrible and 'elpless, and I started to tramp to see what the Bush 'd bring forth ——”

“Why do you offer to undertake work ?” interrupted Hazell, looking sternly into the narrow-set, shifty eyes before him.

“They was on the mend, sir, Gawd's trewth they was, till I started to use 'em, carryin' cans for John there, which made 'em start again crool, all cramped like, for the burrs is in 'em still, and I reckon now my best plan will be to let 'em fester out, and then, if you're convenient, sir, I'd be pleased to make up arrears o' work.” The man held out a pair of curiously-blotched hands—unsightly, the fingers stiffened, and continued plausibly: “You may call *yourself* lucky, I kin assure *you*, sir, if you don't never 'ave no trouble with these said burrs on the run. There ain't no reason for their haction, like the wind wherever it listeth, so that no man sayeth where it cometh, or whence it goeth, and bringin' down values to nothin', and eatin' their way, times, right into the sheep's skin ——”

“If your hands are likely to be long in healing, I don't see what good you can do here. The nearest infirmary is the best place for you.”

“You bein' a newcomer, sir, it's unknown to you that infirmaries and such like ain't everywhere to 'and like the old country, but I might tramp a mort

o' miles, and then where would I get the ticket to get in? Now, what I was wishin' to say to you, sir, since yesterday, that it'd be a favour and a kind hact, and which you'd not repent, for me to stay on here, where I am known to you."

"Known to me! But that is exactly what you are not, my man, except as a fellow with an extraordinary gift of the gab."

"I 'ave been on the station three days with good be'aviour, and that is not the case with any other where I might tramp, for what can a man do in my place but sundownin'? and a new place every night, and not able to earn my tucker for my pore 'ands, which is painful to the feelings."

Hazell disliked the speaker instinctively, but he was just in his dealings. Inflamed wounds need rest, and a few days' rations were of small cost, and there was the trending to be done. He stood considering. The man watched his face, and read the doubt of his mind.

"Luke Rennard is my name, sir, from Southamptonshire; bred to farm-work, and come out 'ere six years since to better myself."

"I don't ask you any questions," said Hazell shortly.

"It's Gawd's trewth, sir, what I tell you, as the lady could answer who was with you the first evenin'—the lady with the 'air, sir, on 'orseback."

The watchful eyes were rewarded by seeing a distinct pause as of the whole body of the master of Burrabindar, who asked slowly:

"The lady? Do you mean Miss Fletcher?"

"I do mean 'er. I knew 'er when she were a tiny mite. I knew 'er agin as soon as I see 'er, though I 'adn't no reason to expect 'er bein' 'ere at the Antipodys, as they say, and it did surprise *me*."

Hazell turned away, closing the subject.

"I shall consider that you owe me a week's work when you can do it, and after that we shall see."

He strolled thoughtfully among Soy Ching's careful furrows.

Really, the odds were not great, either way, in having an extra man upon a station. What harm, if so disposed, could he do? No money lay about for stealing, because coin is of little use in the Bush, and with books or plate, marked sheep, or branded horses, a thief could not get far uncaught, nor make much of an exchange. Besides, if Miss Fletcher did really know him, and would to some extent vouch for him — Again the call at Wamagatta seemed likely; again, angrily, he put the idea aside. What voucher did he want with an odd employé? If the rascal worked, he might stay; if idle, he should go—that was all.

"You likee lettuce?" inquired Soy Ching, drawing near, seeing that his master prodded with his stick in one of the trenches.

"Oh, very much—oh yes! I like some sort of salad all the year round, please. Put in some more when these are gone."

"Next after lettuce, japolikee," Soy Ching corrected blandly.

"What is that?"

"Velly ni', japolikee."

"I don't know it. You needn't try any Chinese vegetables. From the look of these trenches, I should say they would do very well for asparagus."

"Allee same, japolikee," replied the gardener, smiling broadly. "Winter lettuce, same place japolikee."

"I hope japolikee is better than it sounds, as it seems there is some rule about it; but, remember, I want asparagus too," Hazell insisted.

"Allee same, japolikee," replied the Chinaman, unmoved.

Hazell went indoors, wondering if there was a grammar of pigeon-English, which he might order with the work on poultry-farming. On every side his attempted conduct of affairs seemed met with tiny deadlocks. They must be broken. He was resolved to know every particular of the estate. People who had lived here a long time and employed Chinamen from the beginning would perhaps know the meaning of this japolikee, which was all the same. All the same, this pigtailed John was right, devil take it! His natural love for his fellow-creatures and craving for their society was none the weaker that he had renounced them all in rage and come away here, to the very edge of human things, to occupy his life in practical impersonal detail. It was intolerable! It should not be so! He handed in his egg, took over his hot water, and relieved the rapid congestion of his brain by the parboiling of the rest of him.

As he sat at breakfast, clean and glossy, neatly clothed in brown tweed, Mrs. Brock came in, ac-

according to her morning custom, assumed a chair near the door, and inquired his wishes for the day. Her mien was perfectly reassuring, perfectly appropriate to her profession of housekeeping. Her well-established stoutness was that which is expected in women of mature age; her liberal chins, smooth bands of hair, fat voice, and small grey eyes, marked her as a suitable person to have the care of an unrelated male.

"There is no post to-day to come back for, so I shall ride to the top of the run, Mrs. Brock, and look to the men at the fencing there. I shall not be home, I expect, till about dinner-time. Please give me a few biscuits and a pinch of tea and sugar in my sandwich case."

Thus Hazell delivered himself, above the ruins of porridge, ham, and the egg.

"One of your long rides, to be sure," said his housekeeper soothingly. "And what do you fancy for your dinner?"

"Is there anything available besides mutton?"

"To be sure, there's not such a great variety," said Mrs. Brock cheerfully. "If we were sending in, indeed, it's not beef day in Beulah; and a fowl you had yesterday——"

"Well, there are worse things than mutton," Hazell acquiesced, stretching an arm for the honey-jar.

"Unless, indeed, it were the guinea-fowl that strayed in this morning. Joe caught him, in prime condition, as I judge. Could you fancy a guinea-fowl, now, do you think, Mr. Hazell?"

"No difficulty at all. But did you not say it had strayed here, Mrs. Brock?"

"There's no one else I know keeps guinea-fowls but Mrs. Mumford, the manager's wife at Brooksby (you would have seen her at the funeral yesterday, Mr. Hazell, a very nice little lady in a black beige—not that you would notice its being beige, of course—but they drive a flea-bitten grey), and the birds are terrible for wandering—which is my drawback to them. You may have noticed that there are none about the place—the turkeys are plague enough, goodness knows! fully one person's work to catch 'em. Of course, if it had come all these miles from Brooksby, it might ha' come further——"

"But have I any right to eat Mrs. Mumford's poultry?"

"As to right, I couldn't say, I'm sure; but the bird, not being marked or in any way acknowledged, is here in Burrabindar, and, nicely roasted, is excellent eating. I'm partial to it myself."

"That decides me, then, Mrs. Brock. Legally I am no doubt safe; morally, if I deteriorate, you will deteriorate with me; and if at any time Mrs. Mumford should come along full of inquiry, we will confess and pay her the market value."

Hazell brushed his waistcoat free of crumbs, and went to the mantelpiece to choose a pipe.

"There's no objection, I suppose, to my having the buggy into Beulah to-day, Mr. Hazell, if you've no other intentions for Joe?"

"Well, I had meant him to help in the garden, as

that new vagabond is of no use for the present; but, of course, Mrs. Brock, if you really want him ——”

“There’s several things required from Proudfoot’s, Mr. Hazell.”

“Oh, quite so! It should be pleasant for driving—not too much wind.”

“I wonder,” thought Hazell, as he took his way to the stables, “how many other curious creatures will go to-day to gape at Proudfoot in his cage?—cage, I dare say, of silent pride and awful suffering. I don’t grudge him the price of another sack of maize. It may go as an offset to being nine days’ meat for human gadflies. Behaved badly! Very likely.”

A strong, showy grey horse was waiting saddled by the stable-door. He threw his leg over it, and started quickly across the creek, in what for the last few days he had called to himself Diana’s Track. Suddenly he spurred the animal to a canter, crying aloud:

“Behaved badly, did he? I tell you there are times when a man has a *right* to behave badly!”

Hour after hour, under a hot sun in a cloudless sky, he rode through the run, for the most part at the brisk walk in which Australian horses excel. His course was devious, hither and thither, now to inspect a mob of drab sheep scattered on a hillside, and, from their colour, hard to be seen by an unpractised eye; now intent on new lambs, which greatly taxed his unskilled observation; or dismounting to help an awkward ewe which had fixed

herself in an impossible attitude, with her head thrown back, and was prepared to die so. He went off at a tangent here and there to see if the troughs were supplied with rocksalt, and once he secured the horse and spent some time with his tomahawk about a grove of sapling gums—undesired, vigorous things—which were pushing with all their might in a half-cleared flat. It was his rule to pass nothing that he could do himself, and it was only by slow degrees and after noon that he reached the furthest end of the run, where three men were setting a wire fence to subdivide a large paddock. Except for a few sunburnt children playing among the pigs and poultry round a selector's hut, he had seen no being of his own kind since leaving the homestead. His way had been through stretches of pale scorched grass, over dry and rocky hillsides, down deep, steep gullies where the watercourse was dry and all alike grown thinly with the grey eucalyptus. The colour of the whole was extraordinarily dead and monotonous, and accentuated, rather than relieved, by the occasional bloom of a wattle-bush. Here and there the deadness of the scheme came to its climax in an extent of dead timber, ring-barked years ago, standing gaunt and ashen, a weird vision of dry bones. The wild, sunny silence was broken only by the strange, detached notes of the Bush birds—the sharp quaver of the leatherhead, the chord of the magpie, the lament of the carrion-crow, the mad scream of the white cockatoo—and now and again a flock of paroquets, brilliant as jewels in their glistening red and green, made a brief flight and

much chatter from tree to tree. The untiring sun had parched it all, bleached it all, drained it all, exsanguine, and it was lonely beyond the dream of the misanthrope.

Hazell chose a comfortable hollow at the side of a creek, and collecting a few of the abundant fallen twigs and boughs, with a tinder of the spicy leaves, he made himself a fire and boiled his little billy. He ate his biscuits, drank his tea, and lay down for his midday sleep. It was a long one, and the light was well to the west when he raised himself, chilly and ill at ease, as sometimes a child from its morning nap, to take up the interrupted day. His purpose seemed exhausted, his resolve inadequate, his interest fallen; his veins were dull with unconquerable melancholy, and the blackest care was his saddle-companion. This he thought was the way he had chosen out of all possible ways for his life to its close: to ride solitary, year by year, through a wan wilderness, to and from an unlovely solitary home, where no one cared—where there was no one who could care! No one was to blame; it had been an unhurried, voluntary choice, the purchase of this bit of wilderness, neglected by former owners, cursed by overmuch sunshine, which would need a sane and strong master's entire thought and energy that it might be made, after its fashion, fair. He had thought of it as a healthy masculine work, worth the doing, and by its difficulty likely to be absorbing to the mind, and by its strangeness likely to create new spirit within him. The old spirit—that of the keen soldier, the pleasant, prosperous man of

the world—had become so full of pain and revolt, so weary within him, that it had seemed best to let it die, and though half his bodily span was already measured, to raise another from its ashes and begin again. But, if spirit were immortal, if its change, to be radical, must be attempted earlier, or if in his case it had been so forcibly and harshly moulded and welded to one figure that it could never become otherwise, then, to what purpose Burrabindar and the struggle of it?

The endless silence which had appeared so heavenly soothing to his longing when England and Anglo-India gossiped of his name and his disgrace, the solitude for which he had been so greedy, that he might avoid the falseness of women, the contact of happier men—these were growing intolerable. Why study the habits of fowls and the breeding of sheep by day, if by night one sat brooding, brooding, alive in the past, till far into the morning? Better to have stayed among one's own kind, and to have lived all down in human society, which so soon forgets; then the forgetting would have been of his story, not of himself; now himself was blotted out, but doubtless, when needed to point a moral, the talk remained. In any case, moreover, why this great estate? Would it not have been better to lounge out his rest of years on some sand-fringed islet, lost in equatorial seas, where the lithe brown people laugh to the silvery-rustlings of the palms, where needs are few, and languor loses count of time? If one is only to brood, and brood, and brood, with hours of defying the lightnings, better

to do so in luxury and ease than with the strain and burden added of a harassing career. If one did really forget, in the complexities of the fowl-run and the pig-paddock, then welcome farming, and well spent thousands that have made one a farmer! But if one's sub-consciousness is fixed on memory, and it is only one's thinnest surface that is moved by these hateful meaningless creatures, then—"Hold up, miner! No dozing!" Though, why not doze? What should one hurry home for? The guinea-fowl for one, and the eternal evening by the fire? Click! Was that the sound of billiard-balls? Surely the sound is unmistakable. And yet, billiard-balls here in the Bush! What a fool one is! Drowsy Miner stumbles again, and the pannikin rattles within the billy as they hang at the saddle. A drifting mind reverts to a green cloth, and films of tobacco-smoke curling about shaded lamps, and the comely figures of well-set-up men, cheery from the mess.

Five miles to the homestead from this line of she-oaks, and the evening chill falling earlier, surely, for surely the sun was setting earlier, if that could be in the spring! The jackasses—his own particular jackasses—will have done their laugh by the time he reaches their bin, but the laugh will have been there! Indeed, he may hear it elsewhere, for there is no lack of birds to mock, and no lack of folly for them to mock at. How could she? Oh! how could she? He who loved her so! Whose heart had been consumed with tenderness and worship, whom she knew to be her slave! And they asked

him why he would not speak? He would never speak. If she who knew him could bring so foul a charge, he would scorn to meet it. "Hā-hā-hā-hā, hō-hō-hō-hō, hā,hā,hā!" There it comes—the sunset laugh—faintly from a distance, through the cold, still air, where at hand a couple of fat birds take it up, and fill one's brain with it, which is to fill one's world. And so another day is over. Now to eat guinea-fowl, and make good blood and muscle to keep one going through another brooding night, and on to another aimless morning—aimless, except for fencing and fowls and such excellent things. Why eat? Why do anything? Why not die and so forget?

As midnight wore to dawn, Hazell came to a determination with himself. This was his twentieth evening as the master of Burrabindar. If by the twenty-first no human fellowship had stemmed and changed the clanging torrent of his thoughts, he must go mad. Of course there was his gun; it would do him the final service, but he had been so far too proud for death, and he was not willing to yield now. It might be that he could not bear the life, however mitigated—there had always been a joke against him that he would rather hob-nob with a drummer-boy than go alone—but he would not give it up so soon. She might hear, and guess him beaten—*she!* Oh, that vixen, that splendid hunting Diana, who dazzled him with her crown of gold and withered him with her rage against the sins of men to women—if she could only know that all the sins of all the men to women were not equal to the

injury of that woman—her, his wife—to him, himself!

He was stiff with sitting. He left his chair and kicked together the embers of the sinking fire. His face was pale, and his brows knitted over his fierce light eyes; his hair, ruffled with impatient hands, showed its thinness about the temples, and his head was sunk from its fine customary poise. Yet a shrewd spectator, understanding something of the workings of the soul, might have noted, within the worn and weary body, the virility of his passion, and the sanity of his control of it, and might have foretold victory, whatever his foe, if he would fight on.

CHAPTER IV

“A HANDSOME man ; and all my life—I own it—I have felt more tenderly than not toward a handsome man.”

Mrs. Bolitho was sitting in her drawing-room, president at the table of afternoon-tea. She addressed herself to Avis Fletcher, who stood comparing skeins of silk with an elaborate embroidered design, which for convenience of light and height was pinned to the window-curtain.

“That is a side of you which I never understand,” she answered, “and I cannot believe it true. It is not like the rest of you ; it is a gross injustice.”

“That,” replied Mrs. Bolitho, “depends on whether beauty is real or imaginary. If it is real, then it has a real value, and the injustice would be to ignore it, which is philosophy. But, as a matter of solid fact, when I was a girl I know I should have thought things very unjust if my good looks had not met with a great deal of consideration. What do you say, Spencer ? What do you think of the rightness or wrongness of admiring a pretty woman ?”

She turned to the third person in the room—an old man of huge frame, thin and round-shouldered with the weight of years, who sat in an arm-chair by the fire, and watched it with drowsing

eyes. He roused himself at her question, and answered, in the bluff, brisk tones of bygone fashion:

"What's that, eh, my dear? Think about a pretty woman? Of course, I always made a point of thinkin' about a pretty woman as much as possible."

"Oh, of course you did," said Avis quickly, "and I should have abominated you in those days. As it is, I like you only because ——"

"Because the hair is grey, and his teeth are out, and his claws are blunt, and there is a far-off ring about the loudest of his roaring. I know, Miss Avis—I know."

There was regret in the old voice, and the hearers of it paused an instant in respect, in answering sympathy, and because the inevitable is ever met by silence. Life had meant strength and gaiety and gallantry for Spencer Bolitho, but at eighty-two there comes quietness, and the veil faces one. Often in the past it has flapped with the winds of destiny till we seemed almost to touch it; often the tides of fortune have swirled us almost to its turn before they receded with us, and we were drawn into a safer current.

The master of Wamagatta, one of the halest and the least thoughtful of men, looked into the flaming logs before him, and saw them dark with the coming mist. Leaning on her stick, his wife left her chair to bring a cup of tea, and stood by him, saying nothing, carefully arranging a spoon and a piece of cake in the saucer, and devoting a minute to the careful balancing of the whole on his gaunt knee.

He was twenty years older than she, and for twice that length of time they had lived together; but all her romance lay about him, and she grudged its passing away. It is often so, surely, with the wives of handsome, older men. One expects—however much one regrets, one does not resent the death of the aged, who at their best are delightful figures of reminiscence; but they stand, in all their dryness, the sole embodiment of all the bloom and the beauty of life for the women who have loved them—who for love's sake and of keen sympathy have in many ways aged with them, and grown graver than their years—whose hearts are often still fresh, and their fancy unwearied.

"You will not go to Sydney, then, Avis?" said Mrs. Bolitho, returning to the tea-table.

"I will not, though I foresee years of correspondence before I can get silks of the exact tones I want. 'Country orders faithfully executed,' indeed! I wish I could draw up a few shop advertisements; there should be some show of truth about them."

"But the world, my dear Avis, loves to be deceived. No one would go near your shops."

"I assure you, aunty, I would be judicious. Instead of 'Country orders faithfully executed,' I would say, 'Approximations from stock in hand at increased values for the benefit of country customers.' There is a grandiose ring about that which would attract many—ah! and not the rustic only, believe me. Yet such an announcement would morally cover the action of the tradesman who, when you write to him, 'Have you the pink pearl

trimming of the bonnet of the latest fashion ?' replies in this style of Ollendorff, 'No, but I have the blue Ugly of the bathing-wife of old Brighton,' which he sends you, which you probably accept and wear, and your friends in admiration try to secure the like."

"Ah, she can't talk at all, Miss Avis," said Mr. Bolitho, and rose slowly. "I must have my afternoon walk round. I suppose you won't come with me, young lady, as you are puttin' out your fine eyes with that nasty needlework? If there's anythin' I hate, it is to see a charmin' woman doin' needlework."

"No, I shall not come. If there's anything I hate, it is to be called a charming woman, or any kind of woman *quá* woman," replied Avis.

"It's a thing, my dear, you're likely to have to put up with very frequently in the course of your life," answered the old gentleman dryly, and patted her cheek with his big bony hand as he passed with the stiff short steps of age out of the room.

"I wish there were no men and no women," cried Avis; "only a kind of intelligent and slightly materialized angel."

"My constitution is not adapted for that kind of world," answered Mrs. Bolitho, "and I should find it dull. Taking them all round, I like men, and, as I said before, I like them handsome."

"I reject the temptation of good looks; it leads only to folly. Here is this newcomer at Burrabindar, of whom you know nothing, except that he must have more money than wit to buy that great

neglected run-to-waste property, and you definitely commit yourself to liking him because his appearance pleases you. He seemed to me more than usually full of the usual male fallacies and fatuities, and I can't think why you insisted on his promise to come here."

"I am not like you, Avis; I find my fellow-creatures the best of books, and they afford me the change and excitement which I need, which used to be so dear to me—used to be, I say." A ripple of vivacity ran over Mrs. Bolitho's face, making her a generation younger. "Wouldn't I go to Sydney if I had no leg, and no Spencer, and no conscience! Haven't I been through the Cup week here and in Melbourne in the flourishing old times, when money flowed like water? Right through the whole programme—all the garden-parties, all the dinner-parties, every dance of all the balls, from first to last, and come up smiling at the end."

"Oh, you're made of mercury," Avis laughed.

Mrs. Bolitho continued in the liveliest fashion:

"And when I was in Europe, didn't I do more than any New Yorker?—Rome, Paris, Constantinople, the Kremlin, the Waters of Hercules, the Jungfrau. And for two months of a London season I never flagged, though I nearly died of the stuffy heat, and when I had time to think of it, for longing for a breath of my native Bush. There was one great and never-to-be-forgotten day; you know all about it, I know. But it is my one claim to fame—my record day, when I began as soon as the doors opened with the Royal Academy. I

went through all the rooms faithfully with the catalogue. When I got to the sculpture, I was seized with a sudden rage of toothache, and rushed round to a dentist in Savile Row, and had the offending member out. I remember how unwilling the man was; I remember how I insisted. It was Derby Day, and I could not afford to spoil my first Derby for the matter of a molar. Well, it was out. I tore back to the hotel, and put on a brand-new frock. I can see it now; it was of cream-clouded muslin, with an exquisite fawn-coloured sprig, and a bonnet and parasol in fawn-cream to match. I met the two Bolithos at Hatchard's—such a party of us!—and off we set to Epsom. Lord! the first-comer we tooled, I forgot the hole in my jaw; the first glass of champagne and I could have given every grinder in my head for the joy of it all. Back we came, and dined with the Budleigh Bolithos, and went to Berlioz's 'Faust' at Covent Garden; and at midnight, strung up to the wildest pitch of excitement, unconscious of any fatigue whatever, I went off to the Clancarries' dance with the only survivors of our party of twenty—May Moneyppenny and her husband."

"When I hear that story," said Avis, "I feel bruised from tip to toe, as though I had been half an hour on a buck-jumper. Tell me you got to bed, and calm my mind."

"I did get to bed about half-past three—Spencer had been snoring there for hours; he had been dead to the world since dinner—and I slept like a new-born baby. Ah! those were good days!"

Mrs. Bolitho's keen brown face sparkled, and the little stray hairs that escaped from the level of the rich iron-grey roll that semicircled her head seemed to curl more crisply as she spoke. When interested or amused, she seemed for the moment much as she had ever been in her youngest days, a little slim brown woman, of a most captivating vivacity and a most unwearying wit.

"Well," said Avis, "I am quite twice your size, and my movements are proportionately slower. An elephant cannot fly round like a mouse."

"But he should do what he can. Is it the men of Sydney you object to?"

"The men and the women and the whole business of pleasure. I object, and I do not object. What is called society does not amuse me, that is all. Really, auntie, by this time, is there any need to say this again?"

"My dear," answered Mrs. Bolitho, with a change to seriousness, "you should not let one injury spoil your whole life."

Avis winced as though she had been struck; her face altered. For a few seconds she had no consciousness; then, speaking almost at random, "How can you judge?" she asked. "What are you judging from?" And she added hastily: "I admit no injury."

Her companion continued very earnestly:

"Do you know, I think strength shows itself chiefly in power of recovery. I think life means recovery."

"Nevertheless, all things die," answered Avis, with returning self-command.

"Yes, as they lose vitality, recuperative energy. My dear, there should be no weakness about you, except, perhaps, the weakness of too much force. Oh, my dear, when I look at you, I see what I have always longed to be—I, a little black runt all my days. How I have longed at night when I went to bed that I might wake up in the morning and find myself big and fair and golden—splendid, like you are! Why, it's pure gold that you have in your veins, the most precious and ductile of metals, yet you are daunted at the outset."

"How daunted?" Avis interrupted. "Am I not happy in my own way? Have I not health and many interests, and new pursuits whenever I tire of old ones?"

Mrs. Bolitho broke in with an expressive wave of her hand:

"Yes, yes; you ride and read and spin and sew and fiddle, and you cling to the Bush and make a religion of your love for it; but you are not first nor last a rider nor a reader, nor any of the other things, and you are cramping and starving your heart deliberately."

"I cannot think what you mean by talking to me like this. Starving, when I have you and Uncle Bolitho and the children to care for! Cramping, when I am continually learning something fresh!"

"Dear child, you love us all, I know it; and as for your accomplishments, soon there will be no end to them. You have grown by the width of a whole temperament since you came to us eight years ago. All the more reason that you should

not shut yourself away from your fellow-creatures and the world they live in. There are scholars, Avis, and there are saints, and there are stupids; but you are none of the three. You cannot do what you were born to do in a library, nor in a convent, nor in what Elspeth calls a 'hidie-hole.' "

"I am only an ordinary being," Avis put in; but she left the window and walked restlessly about the room, jerking a skein of silk held by the end in either hand.

"I know what you are. I have been studying human nature for the last twenty years, ever since this lameness put a stop to my careering about. Oh! the human documents that have been offered for my reading in this room! And I see now, looking back, that my comment upon almost all of them amounted to this, 'Forget it, and go on.' There was your stepfather, Eddy Bengough: he had much to say for himself at one time; but when he came here with your mother after their marriage, it seemed to me that he had gone on to his heart's desire. The truth is this: I think every one ought to marry. People have told me, people at home in England, that it is because I am of a new country, where life is comparatively simple and reduced to its elements."

"I agree with them," said Avis shortly. "Rules are made for the rule, for the rank and file, not for the exception. Civilization develops and protects the exception."

"Maybe; but my opinion holds good for an overwhelming majority, as the newspapers say. The

mass of people ought to marry. Men and women were made for each other. I look upon an unmarried person as an unfinished thing. Not that I would have a woman go man-hunting—not for all the joys of the most joyous marriage, not to escape the gloom of the gloomiest celibacy. What I say is this—in the style of that lovely proverb, ‘Don’t ’ee marry for money, but go where money is’—never run after a husband, but go where husbands are to be met. Now, they are not, Avis, to be found here in this particular bit of Bush.”

“Prince Charming might ride this way,” said Avis scornfully.

“He is more likely to be in his proper place—at Court. My dear, I want you to go to Court.”

“And take my stand in the anxious ranks of ladies who await the throwing of his handkerchief. Gods and little fishes!”

“It is Prince Charming you are speaking of. He sues on bended knee.”

“I suppose he does not remain there permanently? And then, to quote your beloved Thackeray, when he gets up he goes away. I will quote my beloved Shakespeare, and prefer to endure the ills that I have, rather than fly to others that I know not of. And while I am on the quotation tack, auntie, there is an excellent saying which belonged to Hannah at Uncle Tom’s:

“‘ Was well,
Would be better,
Took medicine,
And died.’”

"Score to you, my dear." Mrs. Bolitho laughed. "Why have I never heard that before? But no, I will not be put off with epigrams. I am quite serious. You must some time think of your own future. What does it promise? You stand here, as it were, between the living and the dead; between the two dear children, who are living enough, thank Heaven! and Spencer and me, who are each, even as Job, a dry tree. What will you do when we are gone? I am sure Caradon and Pheenie would be glad to have you here. No? I know, of course, you would say no. Will you go home to England? Will you take up a selection, or try a small place of your own? Will you go to Sydney? Well, then, what *will* you do?"

Avis was silent. Mrs. Bolitho persisted.

"It's not even, you know, as though you were making friends for yourself, who would receive you gladly into their houses. You hold yourself aloof from the Railtons, and Paultons, and Snowes. They pipe, and you do not dance; they smile, and you yawn; they beckon, and you do not come. There is no offence like this. If you were poor and mean-looking, they could call you shy or jealous; being what you are, they call you haughty, they fear you contemptuous, and they dislike you accordingly. An aristocracy, whether of birth or intellect, is critical and captious, and appreciates the stimulus of a difference; a democracy resents it. To the mass of mankind the unpardonable sin is to be different. I have said it before, and you must forgive my saying it again, I cannot bear the

thought that one who has so much should deliberately bring upon herself a future in which she may have so little."

Avis made no answer. She did not seem to hear her. Her face was very pale, and her lips were set till the wave was passed out of them; her eyes were introspective. Once or twice she stopped in her swinging walk through the room, looked into the fire, looked through the window, then went on again, jerking the skein of silk, as though she were alone. Her companion watched her, anxious to follow the working of her mind, disturbed by the disturbance her words had brought about.

"Is it so important?" she asked; but the girl gave her no heed, and at length she took her stick, and went to her, laying a detaining hand gently on the strong young arm, and saying: "My child, you have two mothers, you know, for I have no daughter, and you must let me speak to you as though you were really my own. I feel, you know, as if you were, for the dear woman you belong to is so far away."

Avis answered her wildly:

"You don't understand. The world is not the same to me as to other girls."

She tried to pace on again in her walk, but Mrs. Bolitho held her with a touch so gentle that she stayed for it.

"Eight years, Avis—eight years," she urged.

"Or eighteen or eighty!" cried Avis scornfully.

"But a death-wound should heal with you in eight years."

“Grant it healed—there are differences. No, auntie, you are wise and sweet; dear auntie!” She softened suddenly, and rested her hands on the little black silk shoulders so far below her own, and looked affectionately into the small brown face. “Dear auntie, let me go my own way. I am content here; I can breathe. There are no prying eyes in the gum-trees, and no jealousies in your house. This for the present, and for the future, it must take care of itself. When the sap rises in me, and I want to go forth and do silly things—spend mad days like your first Derby Day; start across the Continent on a bicycle—Hajji or Pilgrim shall gallop it out of me, and I will come back and spin to you. Don’t shake your head. After all, what is your alternative? The incessant dressing, the eternal smiling, the insatiable jealousies, the immeasurable weariness of living among a lot of people who don’t care one halfpenny for one, whom one never wants to see again.”

Mrs. Bolitho laughed.

“Oh, you can talk, my dear—talk so well. And only I to hear you!”

There was a sound of voices outside. With a fine gesture of mock resignation, Avis pointed through the window to the drive, where the huge, stooping figure of Mr. Bolitho walked slowly in conversation with Ralph Hazell, broad, erect, in his prime of strength.

CHAPTER V

“MR. HAZELL tells me he comes by your invitation, my love, but I tell him we are always happy to see our neighbours—most happy, I’m sure. Do you drink tea, sir, in the afternoon, or will you take somethin’ stronger?”

Mr. Bolitho brought in the newcomer to his wife, and the great frame, for all that the younger was a big man, stood large above him, aged though it was. In spite of the cordiality of the hostess, the visitor showed a shade of embarrassment as he seated himself. Miss Fletcher, standing near the fire, had so contrived that, without actual rudeness, she had met him only by a bow. He felt that, as much as she was concerned, he was to come no farther, and with a little inward burst of blasphemy, he asked himself “Why the d—— had he come at all?” yet he was delighted to be there. The room was charming. It had the comfort of a place meant for everyday life, and a grace that was intended for the pleasure of guests. A warm smell of violets was in the air; there were good water-colour drawings on the walls; the furniture, for the most part of fine French walnut, was something out of the common in design; the old-fashioned silver of the tea-service was radiant with careful tendance. Hazell’s experience of station-houses was not so large that he could know how far this in taste

and delicacy was above the greater number of them. But comparatively with his own unlovely home he felt himself in a palace.

"No, I had no difficulty in finding my way," he answered to a question from Mrs. Bolitho. "I have a general sense of direction—it is quite a sixth sense, you know; I have found it very useful in many circumstances. Prowling round on the chance of meeting a boar, now, for instance, in the Himalayas, in an uncommonly dark hour before dawn, several of us would have been permanently accounted for, if it had not been for my instinct of direction. Have you ever done any pig-sticking, Mr. Bolitho?"

Hazell was nervous, and talked rapidly.

"A little in Queensland, sir; my experience of countries is limited to England and Australia. In *my* days a West Countryman who had no particular curiosity as to foreign ways stayed mostly at home."

"Indeed, you have everything in the West Country to keep you there—mild climate, lovely scenery, keen sportsmen. I remember a first-rate day with the Devon and Somerset——"

"Do you indeed, sir!" Mr. Bolitho broke in heartily. "I foresee that you and I will be great friends; many's the run I have had with them, and after the fox with the Dartmoor and the North Cornwall. Lord! who'd think it now? It takes all I know to keep me on an old quiet horse in a great stock-saddle with great knee-pads; my grip is about gone."

"Don't be unreasonable, Spencer! You have

gripped enough in your time. In his wild days, Mr. Hazell, before I had him under my wing, my husband was a noted steeplechaser."

"Have I come among centaurs here?" asked Hazell, with a smile. "Miss Fletcher also seems to be past mistress of the horse." He spoke of her that he might openly look toward her. In the quiet colouring of the room her hair made a spot of splendour, as the sun will do in the murk of a London sky in winter. He noticed that it grew low on her forehead, wavy from the roots, and that she wore it brushed so loosely back that it rippled over the edge of her ear. He could not take his eyes from it. She glanced indifferently and made no comment. Mrs. Bolitho hastened in politely asking him to name his favourite sport.

"I am best with a gun," Hazell answered.

"Eh? what's that you say—gun? Then you have come to the wrong part of the world, I fear, sir. No game worth the name here, sir—poison the rabbits and 'possums, and pay so much a scalp for kangaroos and wallabies, and all the rest of 'em. Killed anyhow. No, no game; but Miss Fletcher, now, is just uncommon clever with a pistol; she can give most people fifty in a hundred and beat 'em in a canter."

"I hope I may some day have the advantage of being beaten. Miss Fletcher seems to do everything well."

"Miss Fletcher is a restless creature, and spends her time learning new things," answered the lady in question impatiently.

Hazell took her hint and changed the talk to himself.

"That's what I am trying to do every minute of the day just now—to learn new things; I own I find it hard. Your Bush, Mrs. Bolitho, is a strange language to me, and I have been thinking lately that I am too old to attack it."

"My husband, having spent one fortune at home, came out here to make another, when he was, I suppose, about your age, Mr. Hazell—but few things are harder to guess than the age of people one meets. I have long ago given up dogmatising on the subject. Look at me! I dare say you have actually written me down a hundred! Well, I assure you I am a mere sixty-one, a warm-blooded, lightsome sixty-one." Mrs. Bolitho laughed, sighed, and laughed again, and added: "It is perhaps the chief good of advancing years that one can say exactly what one wants to say."

"I never knew you do otherwise, my love," said Mr. Bolitho, catching the last sentence. "I generally take a crawl about the place, sir, for an hour or so, to get an appetite for my dinner; will you accompany me?"

Hazell wondered and admired, and was filled alternately with hope and despair as he made a slow round of the homestead of Wamagatta. It was one of the largest and most highly-beautiful and improved estates in the colony. For a mile or two in all directions about the house the grass-land had been cleared to absolute cleanness and smoothness, large gum-trees, chosen for their size and kind, being

left at intervals, so that, allowing for difference of herbage and colouring, the effect was somewhat that of an English park. North and west of the house a thick, long double row of pines protected ten acres from the fierce dry winds that blow from the interior of the continent, and these acres were so arranged by Mr. Bolitho's wish that fruit and flowers, shrubs, playgrounds, and vegetables, were close upon and among each other. Great mulberry-trees and fig-trees flourished along one side of the tennis-court; the trellised vine-walks on the other side divided it from the rosary, beyond which was the orchard. In clear view from the drawing-room was a plantation of oleanders and wattle, and a line of laburnums and peach-trees, the latter planted entirely for the sake of their bloom. Near the verandah was an abundance of carnations, violets, mignonette, and other hardy, sweet-smelling flowers, which could bear the severe frosts of the winter and yet be kept alive by careful watering during the summer. But Hazell knew that pleasure-grounds were a small part of Australian farming—comparatively of no more importance than the icing to the cake. A permanent water-supply and a couple of clever Chinamen were really all that was needed for them. The spacious stone dwelling-house, the extent of the outbuildings and stables and steading generally, added to his recollection of such of the run as he had already seen in his coming, its clearness from timber, the efficiency of its fencing, and, turning to his host, he said at length, with a smile:

“Like the Queen of Sheba, I have no more spirit

in me. It is my hope to do all with Burrabindar that may be done with any station whatsoever; but when I think of it, and look at this—by Jove!”

“You are quite right, sir. I am infernally sorry for you with Burrabindar. Fact is, David Snowe, who had it before you, shockin’ drinkin’ man—whole place goin’ to rack and ruin for the last ten years. Nothin’ goin’ in—all goin’ out. Ten years! Ay, fully that, and ten years in the Bush, sir, where we deal with miles, not acres, as we do at home, and it takes us all we know to keep up with things—fences and suckers, and all that. Had his excuses, though. David Snowe, only son, fine young fellow as ever I saw, swept away crossing a creek flood-time—foolhardy. Snowe never held up his head afterward—except to drain his glass—ha, ha!”

“They said I got it cheap,” pursued Hazell; “but when I think of the thousands that ought to be spent on it, I am disposed to call it dear.”

“Don’t take Wamagatta as a standard, or you may run to a million. Why, this must be nearly as old as I am. It was a fine place when I came out first with an introduction to Major Bullpet, my wife’s father—his place—my wife his only child.”

Hazell bowed. “But you have gone on improving,” he said.

“Yes, oh yes, certainly. But you see, sir, I had the advantage of marryin’ not only a very charmin’, but a very clever and practical woman. Never was very clever myself; very little good at Greek and Latin; best in the pigskin, you know. But Mrs.

Bolitho, born Australian, born Bush-woman, she knew and she understood, and she loved every stick of the place. Always ridin' over it from her childhood with her father, and bein' very intelligent—those were the days to make the money, too. By gum! I'll say—we don't swear these times—by gum! the money came in then."

"As it will never do again, I imagine."

"Never, sir. Wool will never again fetch one and sixpence a pound unscored. If it should, you could set fountains to play on the lawn of Burrabindar, and build yourself courts for royal tennis. You will like to see the stables, of course?"

They were of brick, and could have held twenty horses. At the moment seven or eight were stalled.

"Two of these are Miss Fletcher's," said Mr. Bolitho; "been in all the winter, and this sort of dry spring they are likely to stay in. She likes 'em high fed."

"I recognise the chestnut," said Hazell, as a big bright animal turned a full and lively eye upon him from the rack. He saw the sunset again, and the hatless rider with her golden head. "Tall horse—plenty of power."

"Blood and bone, both, sir; carry a man sixteen stone; gave twenty-five pounds for her three years ago; takes a fence like a bird."

"This is an Arab." Hazell moved to the next compartment.

"Cert'nly—can't mistake the shoulders. Missy has a craze for a mount with brains. Hajji she calls him; says he knows everythin'; says Arabs

know twice as much as Western-bred horses. Would make a first-class polo pony, Hajji; but ladies don't play polo—yet.”

“I remember a ladies' match in India.”

“You surprise me! Was it any good?”

“There was fine riding, but rather much of humbug, settling this and that—hair coming down, and so forth. Perhaps the ladies felt that a few details of the kind were expected of them—as ladies. It struck me at the time, I remember, that if they could have forgotten they were ladies, they might have played polo.”

Mr. Bolitho had no mental turn for hair-splitting.

“Lady should never forget herself,” he replied off-hand. “Pretty woman never looks so well, though, as on horseback, in my opinion. That's Mustang, my old hunter, in the end stall, only horse I ever mount nowadays; paces like velvet, steady as time, understands me. Good boy, Mustang, good boy! The stranger, I take it, is your own, Mr. Hazell? Fully up to your weight, I should say. The rest are the drivin' horses. Gettin' dark, isn't it? I like to be in before the light goes, if you don't mind.”

As they neared the house, they were met by delightful voices, the artless noise and unmeasured laughter of children, and the mixed chiding and cooing of an attendant adult.

“Oh, Boyah! Boyah! what a beautiful Boyah! Avis's own Boyah! And a naughty, wriggling Boyah, too! Must he get down, then? Very well, then, Dot shall have the fairy story told all into

her own ear, the right ear, the curly-wurly ear. Boyah mustn't hear a word of it because he can't keep still."

Delicious tones, sweet, warm. Hazell paused in the verandah to hear them, and his hand gripped the railing, for it was the hand of a sore-hearted, forlorn man, outside all the exquisite abounding tenderness of the life of his kind.

"Rer-rer-rer-rer!" the gay, rude exhibition of extreme youth found utterance.

"Auntie Avis! deah Avis! I can't hear the story if Boyah makes such a noise."

"Rer-rer-rer-rer!" again, and a roll of bangs and thumps.

"No, I see," said soft reproof; "Boyah must spend his good-night hour with the pigs, then Dot will be able to enjoy her fairy story. There *was* a story about a cobbold—a cobbold who stole the cheese that was put in the trap for the mouse, and brought it every morning to the poor prisoner in the dungeon who had no food—no food at all, poor prisoner! and kept him alive. Dot can hear the story to-morrow, when Boyah will be with the pigs, hearing nothing but 'whomph.' Never mind, Dot will have a song:

" 'Song of a merry maid weeping, mum,
Whose eye was sad, and whose mouth was glum;
Who sipped no sup, and who craved no crumb,
For she wanted a tale of a fairy.' "

Hunting Diana—fooling like a mere Dryad, voicing the sheer, surging, thoughtless joy of being! The two men looked through the uncurtained win-

dow and saw in the firelight the three at play. Miss Fletcher, sitting on the armchair, was swinging up a chubby little girl out of the reach of a chubbier, smaller boy, whose fatness was insecurely supported on broad white legs, whose upturned head displayed a mat of yellow hair.

"My grandchildren—orphans, I am sorry to say," Mr. Bolitho explained hastily, and led the way in upon them.

Miss Fletcher ceased her fooling immediately, and Dot was sent to find Mrs. Bolitho.

"She has an antipathy for me," thought Hazell, and sat silent before Diana, making dumb advances of the hand to Boyah, who sang on "Rer-rer!" and beat upon the floor with the handle of a broken paper-knife, and gave no heed to the silly grown-up person, who, like all grown-up persons, laid himself out to gain attention the moment he appeared.

"Not wanted, of course. Oh, the old days twenty years ago, when I was welcome anywhere! Very good. I'll go back to my sty and stay there," thought Hazell, and fixed his rejected hand in his jacket-pocket. Mrs. Bolitho, however, flouted the suggestion.

"What! Let a stranger, a squatting neighbour, moreover, leave us at this hour and go back unfed to his own place! It be would high treason to Australian hospitality! One can see you are a poor, stiff-necked, stuck-up Englishman! You will sleep under this roof to-night—isn't that so, Spencer?"

She raised her voice.

"Most cert'nly, my dear, most cert'nly," said Mr. Bolitho vaguely from the dark corner of the sofa, where he sat with his head sunk on his great chest, dozing again.

Hazell objected with a smile that he had no change of clothes, and was still so stuck-up and stiff-necked that he could not be comfortable during an evening in ladies' presence, wearing the rough suiting of the day.

"I like your civilisation," cried the hostess; "but I can satisfy it. Do you think there has been a household of men—of hospitable Australian men, mind you—for the last half-century, and that decent threadbare black male garments are not to be found in it? My husband will not offer you his, he is such an elephant; but there are some that will fit you. Do you doubt my eye, Mr. Hazell? You have never been a little small creature, who looked curiously and enviously at every one of more stature than yourself. I can tell to the half of an inch how many inches you boast above mine."

A tall old woman, witch-like, lean, with a colourless, wrinkled face, appeared unceremoniously at the door, and cried in a high Scotch tone that it was time and mair that the bairnies cam' awa' to their beds.

"To be sure, Elspeth. Say good-night—a nice lady and gentleman good-night, Dot and Boyah, and go like good dears. Mr. Hazell, you needn't kiss them if you would rather not."

"I am afraid they would rather not kiss me," he replied, with unusual intelligence.

But Dot came immediately with childish coquetry and hitched herself on to his knee, and looked at him searchingly, and composed her wide mouth into the form proper to osculation.

"Rer-rer-rer—ra-a-ah!" yelled Boyah, caught up from the rug and borne away, naughty, impolite, full of protest at the exchange from warmth and movement and impunity to the ordeal of the bath and the nothingness and silence of the nightly sheets.

"Your whiskers are soft," was the unexpected declaration of Dot. "I like your whiskers. Grandpa's hurt me."

Elspeth strode across and swept off the child, whose hands were making free with the visitor's short beard, and he was thankful for the insufficiency of the light, which could not betray to Miss Fletcher his ridiculous youthful blush. She, however, did not look at him. She followed the children, and Hazell's pale-grey eyes followed her as she did so. Mrs. Bolitho noted them both, and her spirits mounted within her, for here was arising (or, she told herself, she was more mistaken than she had ever been in her life) a human struggle of the most interesting sort, in which her generalship might find full scope. The constraint of one who was evidently a man of the world, the following glance, the rare attraction of Avis anywhere, but particularly here in the lonely Bush—had Providence perhaps sent this man in answer to prayer, since the girl would not go to Sydney?

Mrs. Bolitho set herself to study him in the quiet

half-hour before the dressing-bell. They talked of many things, and she led him skilfully in many high- and by-ways, that he might betray himself, write himself legibly out for her reading. She led him with a clear conscience. She dealt with men from the social point of view, in which they are the regiment and women the commanders. She had heard it argued in the modern scientific fashion that the sexes are much the same, that what is suitable for the one is equally so for the other, that in like conditions they will behave alike, but she scorned the hypothesis. Men were men, and women were women, and they were twain. She had loved and married Spencer Bolitho—with a difference; she had ruled him through forty happy years—with a difference; and she believed in waking all other men to whatever end—with a difference.

Ralph Hazell answered to her treatment fairly well. There was nothing of modern scientific in him. He yielded up to his hostess the personal detail of Rugby schooling and subsequent service of the Queen, of intimate acquaintance with the home counties and the West of Ireland and the Bengal Presidency, and of London from the standing of Kensington Gore and the Junior United Service Club. He acknowledged a strong love of sport, combined with some taste for letters and general information; he wore flannel on principle and drank ale by preference. She made a host of inferences that were surprisingly true. He had never known the want of money, which had come

to him through commerce of a high kind, probably no further back than his father, so that his purchase of a great stretch of wilderness bespoke perhaps the land-hunger of the Briton, perhaps she knew not what, for the treatment by difference failed before a mysterious barrier raised steadily by one who was neither a child nor malleable. His hair, alas! that dark-brown hair which Dot had found so silky, was thinning at the temples, might be from the ardours of Bengal, might be from the wearing of years, might be from the something which lay behind the bar. It was not likely, she reasoned, to be disgrace which had brought him so far from the joys of pig-sticking and the comforts of the Junior United Service Club; his face was firm and proud, and there was no turning away in his eyes. A love affair, then? Oh! masses for his soul and the woman's if it had been a love affair gone wrong, for the force of his personality was immense—she felt it on the further side of the room, she told herself, as if it were a thunderstorm. Was he a widower, and was that the brow of grief? Mrs. Bolitho was intensely interested; she could not tell. "Some day," she thought, "I must have the bar down, and if I am swept away—well, I am. Meanwhile, I like him."

"I should say your fowls were over-fed," she advised aloud, for he had begun to unfold his tale of present trouble. "Too much corn is a mistake. I don't know your Mrs. Brock, but I expect I know her sort. It is astonishing how liberal some people like to be with other people's property."

"I've noticed that before now. But I am in difficulty with regard to all these new things, and Mrs. Brock knows my depth of ignorance; she may resent suggestion."

"Helpless, unimaginative man! Quote me. Tell her that my fowls are laying as if it were the height of summer. As a matter of fact, their conduct is nothing to boast of; but I have always considered that Heaven looks upon the motive of a speech far more than upon the mode of it."

"What casuistry!" said Hazell, laughing.

"Good word, 'casuistry,'" replied his hostess.

The black clothes fitted tolerably, and Hazell trusted to the indifference of Diana's brown eyes not to see that the bottom button of the waistcoat remained undone; but, indeed, if she saw, she was welcome to see. He made no pretence of being young; he drank ale by preference. He had finished with woman forever, and this was a kittle red filly as ever champed upon the bit. When he had thought of her in those terms he apologised suddenly, commenting upon himself that he had degenerated during the last year or two, that once on a time it had been his pride that his inmost thoughts of a gentlewoman had been those of a gentleman. He looked round the bedroom when his dressing was finished; its comfort and simplicity touched him to a feeling of homeliness that had grown strange to him, and he realised how he had missed it. Home is like health: when we have it we are unconscious of it, and we know its value by its loss. Some young man had slept here, he thought—very

likely he of the slimmer waist whose clothes he now wore ; young certainly, for the picture of honour was a large photograph of some pretty empty girl of the diaphanous, willowy type, so dear to muscular ladhood in search of contrast ; young, for on the high wooden mantelpiece lay in faded leather case two big expensive meerschaum pipes and a cigar-holder, all elaborate in design—one broken and carefully mended with a heavy silver band. Meerschaum and stage-loveliness, thought Hazell with a kindly scorn. Oh, the happy phase when such things are desirable ! Was the fellow dead, he wondered, or only gone away to grow older ? The dinner-bell sounded.

Mrs. Bolitho said nothing in disparagement when she saw that Avis had chosen her favourite and oldest dress of what she called the "family evening order." After all, nothing could spoil her shape and stature, nothing could dull her colouring ; and this old trailing robe of black velvet, with large, loose sleeves, all embroidered with golden silk, became her admirably. Hazell gave her more than apology as he faced her at table. He drew a long breath as their eyes met ; then, in deference to her curious, quick glance of resentment, he bent over his soup and tried to talk no more.

"Something I said about Larry Fagan that funeral day annoyed her, I suppose," he thought ; "or else it's Dr. Fell again."

The courses of the dinner were few and plain, but good enough to be enjoyed by a healthy diner, and the wine and the service were beyond reproach.

Mr. Bolitho, sitting at the head of the board, with his head sunk on his chest, said little; his hour came later with the port—the hour for an old man's monologue of anecdote. He left the customary exchange of table-talk to his wife, and Hazell met her more than half-way, pricked by a sudden vain-glorious resolve to show himself a man of the world, not to be despised in any neighbourhood. Surely it was insufferable that the chance of a pleasant evening in this wild land should be spoilt for him by the hostility of unreason, however handsome. He refused beer; he said as he took it that he thought burgundy the best all-round wine.

"My son Caradon is a devoted polo-player," Mrs. Bolitho told him presently. "The team meets quite near Beulah, in one of the Wamagatta paddocks."

"I have given up polo. I don't care to have pony murder on my conscience. I want a weight-carrier nowadays."

"Most remarkable thing," said Mr. Bolitho, waking up, "how long I was able not only to ride but to race—only steeplechases, you know—myself, considerin' my size. I was always uncommon thin, never an ounce of fat on me. That's one thing, and the rest was just hands, as it always is in racin'—hands, and a feelin' for the horse; always knew what he could do. Extraordinary thing the hundreds of thousands that have been thrown away because the jockey had no feelin' for the horse!"

"Caradon will be sorry you don't ride. He thinks polo every man's duty," said Mrs. Bolitho.

"Was that his room where I dressed this evening?"

The bright elderly face clouded.

"No," she said—"no. My eldest son is married. There is plenty of room for him and her and theirs here, but I fear a mixed ménage. I am sorry he is not here to-night. They dine with us once a week."

"There is something patriarchal, it seems to me, about Bush life," said Hazell.

"Ah! the wide spaces, the close family intimacy, the building up of the family," answered his hostess quickly.

"Yes; and I always think it a good life."

"High thinking and plain living—books by the cartload, and mutton by the month. Dear auntie, the best of life is good anywhere, but I am afraid that all that most of the Bush has to boast of is the plainness and the mutton," said Miss Fletcher.

"My mutton is rather bad," said Hazell to her.

"Well, it's wool you have come for, isn't it?" said Mrs. Bolitho, laughing.

"I admit it. Sometimes I think a little longingly of Highland, or Welsh, or Southdown."

"You will add Tasmanian to that when you have proved it," said Miss Fletcher briefly; and, compelling Mrs. Bolitho's attention, she rose and left the room.

The host offered cigars, but excused himself, saying that he enjoyed his wine.

"In my young days, sir, and in the country, smokin' wasn't so fashionable as it is now. I like a

cigar very well now and then, but I like my glass of port better without it. You smoke, of course ? ”

Hazell allowed it, and in the shelter of the spicy cloud he spoke from his curiosity.

“ Your niece, I take it, is English, Mr. Bolitho ? ”

“ My niece—eh, what ? I beg your pardon ? ”

“ Miss Fletcher.”

“ Ay, ay, to be sure ; very natural, the mistake. No relation whatever ; just her kind affectionate way of speakin’ of Mrs. Bolitho and myself. Mother in England ; English to be sure. Married again ; most charmin’ and very superior woman ; husband great friend of ours. Miss Fletcher’s been livin’ with us for several years—a matter of seven or eight, I believe.”

Hazell bowed. “ Striking-looking woman,” he murmured.

“ Eh ! what ? For her health, I’m told. Most cert’nly she’s been very well since she came—thin slip of a girl when she came. You don’t drink, then ? ”

“ I smoke, sir.”

“ Quite so. Things change. My sons, like you, take their tobacco and their coffee or their whisky. Oblige me by ringin’ that bell near you ; your coffee shall be brought to you.”

“ May I ask how many sons you have ? ”

“ I had three, sir ; I have, unfortunately, only two. My poor son Richard died in Queensland, where he was managing a station—dysentery ; his wife, poor thing, followed him within a year ; his children you have seen. But for them, Mr. Hazell,

I think Mrs. Bolitho would have gone too." The brave old voice faltered very little; the wearing of eighty years had blunted the force of sorrow, and the jauntiness of bygone fashion would ring in it to the end.

After a decent pause Hazell learnt that Eldred was a captain of artillery, quartered in Jamaica. One or two stories followed of an old and florid style, and suddenly the host fell asleep. The guest finished his coffee and his cigar, and waited awhile politely. The white military moustache and whisker remained sunk on the big hollow chest, the heavy breathing told of depth of slumber.

Hazell thought of the lady of the house and her sparkle, of the adopted niece and her glow, and he rose softly and walked on tiptoe through the open door and crept along the passage, guided by voices. The drawing-room was open, the floor was firm; without a creak he gained the threshold and stood looking in. Mrs. Bolitho sat by a small table on which, between her and himself, was a lamp, and she read aloud from a newspaper. Near the fire, on a high oak chair, sat Miss Fletcher spinning. Her handsome ivory face was bowed, thoughtful, as though her mind were given to her work or to what she heard; her long white fingers moved deft and steady about the yarn, and flamelight caught the beading on her shoe as it played quickly on the treadle. The wheel passed evenly, murmurously. She sat in perfect and most satisfying repose of head and feature, and the noble width and curve of her classic shoulders, her long easeful limbs, the

absolutely rhythmic motion of foot and hands, deepened and vivified that stillness.

The little quaint machine screened her, separated her, to his fancy, from all the other world; the veil-like revolution of the wheel, the dreamy whir of it, set her apart, beautiful, mysteriously feminine. He could have knelt before her worshipping the incomprehensible, the different; he could have knelt for years! But she looked up, as though his force constrained her, and saw him worshipping. He came forward on the impulse and stood before her.

"You make the fairest scene I ever saw," he said; and though he tried to smile conventionally, the adoration was in his eyes.

She answered only by an involuntary tremble of the steady fingers on the yarn, but for the moment there was peace between them, a mutual peace of honey sweetness.

CHAPTER VI

HAZELL was gone soon after sunrise the following morning. A note on the breakfast-table, civil in thanks and excuses, pleaded a suddenly remembered engagement with the Beulah stock and share agent. Mrs. Bolitho was disappointed—for her own sake only—as of an absorbing game, not for Avis's sake, for the pair had agreed admirably during the evening, saying little to each other, because Hazell had taken a hand at picquet with herself, and played respectably, while the spinning-wheel had known no intermission. The keen sense of the elder woman had felt the strong currents passing between them; she had noted the involuntary straying of her partner's eyes, and she had exulted silently that, if he were as honest as he seemed, the tide of life should flow so fast. For his disappearance, nothing is surprising in the relation of man and maid; he might, being arrived at years of discretion, have taken fright at his own advance in emotion, and so taken flight, or the appointment might be real. Avis, for her part, seemed to have risen with a satisfactory reference, though of avoidance, to him. She was dressed, as she would say, for domesticity; but on an average of five mornings in the week she would appear in her riding-skirt, ready for the exercise of which, unlike most of those who live in the Bush, she never wearied.

It was as though she had considered the probability of a ride with Hazell, and had mentally declined it.

"I never saw anything healthier," thought Mrs. Bolitho, but she spoke no comment, and taking for granted the excitement which each had felt in the other's presence, she, with a quiet mind, left them to the anti-climax of absence.

Avis withdrew after breakfast to her own quarters, two rooms at the end of the long low house, which was built round three sides of a square. Her parlour, boudoir, den, as she named it, according to the moment's point of view, showed as strange a medley of taste, pursuit, changing fancy, as was ever presented by a lady in her chosen place. Reader, spinster, horsewoman, embroiderer, violinist were evident. On the writing-table, which offered so little free space that evidently not much was written there, stood several photographs of a grave, noble-looking woman—like Avis, yet not like her, but plainly her mother; a stout, elderly man, kindly, wearing the white tie of old fashion in Holy Orders, appeared more than once. On the walls were photographs of horses, of Italian and New Zealand scenery, and a couple of fair water-colour sketches representing each an English country house of the beautiful and healthy sort. There was nothing tawdry, nothing shabby, but disorder reigned unquestioned.

Avis took her violin from its case; it was in the Mazzini style, and there was a pleasing doubt that it might be an original. She tuned it carefully, set

a sheet of music on the tall stand, and began to play a study. She had worked steadily at fiddling since she began it four years before, trying to make up by hard practice for the disadvantages of adult learning. She had a firm sweep with the bow, and her ear was excellent, and she had reached the point when she was glad to play for her own sake; but it seemed this morning that she lacked patience. A few bars went badly; she repeated them, and they were worse; she passed them, and a string broke, and she put the whole thing away without any tenderness such as one expects from a violinist, and sat down to the writing-table. Pushing things together, pens and pencils, skeins of silk, envelopes, scissors, she cleared a space for a blotting-pad and rushed upon a letter:

“WAMAGATTA, N. S. W.,

“*September 12.*

“DEAREST MAMMA,

“It is early in the week to start my talk with you, but I meant to devote this morning to the fiddle, and somehow the fiddle is intractable, and I must soothe my wounded artisthood by the most soothing thing I know, next to your presence. You will be here in the winter, but this is only the spring, the opening spring! so you are a long way off. Nothing suits me so well as a gallop in the morning. It seems to give me mental balance for the day, and Pilgrim is going beautifully just now. She knows not only what I want, but what I am going to want. It was the greatest success naming

her Pilgrim—people always call her *him*, and when I am particularly insistent with my *she*, they turn upon me, or half turn, to tell me that a pilgrim is a male, and then they are not sure, because they seem to have heard of females going to Lourdes and so forth, and I see it in their faces. Not that I see many strange faces, thank goodness! There was one here yesterday, that man Hazell whom I mentioned to you before. Aunty Bolitho evidently likes him extremely; I cannot tell if I do or not. He is fine-looking, but has curious light-grey eyes—eyes with a kind of white light in them, which seem to scrutinise one with a kind of cold fierceness. I should guess him to be another of the countless bird-of-prey men, though he has the manners of a gentleman, and Dot took a fancy to him—a good sign, I always think. I hear vaguely that he has been a soldier. Could Colonel Bengough look him up and find out anything about him? Our solitary Army List is not to be found. Ralph Hazell, age about forty-five; has served in India.

“I must have up Sadouski from Sydney for my violin, and put in fourteen lessons of as many hours as he likes. Mrs. Bolitho is so good in letting me have anybody to teach me anything. They enjoy it too; it is a capital holiday change for them, and this is a nice house to stop in. Of course she may refuse, that I myself may be driven down to Sydney. She was begging me yesterday, almost with tears, to go there and mix in general society, instead of wasting my youth and spoiling my life here in the empty Bush.”

Avis stopped, and looked straight before her out of the window. The park-like land, with its scant, whitened herbage, its occasional large, colourless hills, stretched away to meet the sky. In the distance there was a small wooden hut; a neat iron fence crossed the foreground. "The empty Bush," she repeated aloud, and her clear brown eyes grew fixed and desolate. She dropped her pen, and got up to pace the room, the fingers of one hand playing with her watch-chain. Her face was as pale as ivory; her eyelids showed a delicate redness, as though she had not slept the night before; her lips were firm set in a vivid line. Words crowded behind them, but none escaped; the trouble, of whatever nature, was locked in by all her strength. Presently she sat down, and, catching up the pen, wrote on vehemently:

"She does not understand; at least, I never know how much she knows—not all, I think. No one understands but you, mamma; and here I cannot bear those who might know or get to know. Remembrance of that year after is one of the indestructible things. I could not live through such another. This man Hazell may know. Darling, you have never said one unkind word, never even a reproachful word to me. You knew there was no need of it."

She stopped again, and drew one of the photographs nearer, and looked at it earnestly, then went on:

"I have your dear face by me, full of nobleness and tenderness and wisdom. I think you must be the ideal mother, who knows, who never condemns, who heals and shelters. And I am writing what will be cruel words to you; for how you care for me! Perhaps I will not say them, darling. In any case, I will send another proper letter later, when this mood is over and the mail is in, and I have yours to answer. Let me write to you now like this, because you are the only one to whom I can speak so, and because, though I do not often do it—why, I think it is only the third time in all these years—the memory is in my heart continually; it dies not, is not quenched. How could it be? Yet, honestly, I did not deserve it—not all of it. Many girls have been as foolish, as headstrong, as self-centred as I was. They have longed for excitement and adventure; they have been swirled away on the torrent of youth, just as I was; but retribution did not come to them as it came to me. Honestly, mother dearest, I did not deserve it; not all of it."

She hid her face in her hands, tearless, shivering as though an inward force shook her. Her attitude, the expression of her whole body, was that of desolation. The splendid lines and vigour of lines, the richly-crowned head was shadowed with despair. She sat silent under it, motionless except for the occasional shiver, as at some unbearable thought. A travelling-clock in a leather case ticked on the mantelpiece; a fire of logs gave forth a little stir of

sound. Outside, in the untempered flood of sunlight, the magpies crooned their brief harmonious chords.

Sounds broke the stillness. Heavy, clumsy little feet in strong boots came rapidly along the passage, and the door was beaten hastily. "Opy! opy! opy! opy!" the hoarse imperious tones of Boyah explained the matter. She paid no attention. The hammering fists grew angrier. "Opy! opy!" he cried again. She raised her head. "Go away!" she said harshly; but he bawled on, unaccustomed to neglect, making so much din that she sprang up and did open to a dirty little figure in a muddy pinafore, with grimy features and a dusty mat of yellow hair, who fell forward on the floor, picked himself up, and turned upon her indignantly.

"Go away, Boyah. You must not come here unless I ask you; and it is your sleeping time," she said, standing forbidding in the way.

He did not know the strange stern voice and the dreadful countenance where he had expected welcome and adoration. He looked puzzled, then frightened; then his pudgy lineaments puckered themselves in dismay, and with a whimper he turned to trot away. Something in the helpless chubby hands outspread, something of piteousness in a child repulsed, smote Avis at heart. She darted after him, caught him violently up, and bore him back into her parlour. He burst into loud cries. She sat him on her knee and dried his eyes, and smoothed and dusted his dress; then, putting the short pudgy arms round her own neck and

pressing her face to his and rocking herself with him to and fro, she said to him passionately :

“Boyah must forgive Avis. Avis was unhappy—oh, so unhappy ! She had forgotten Boyah in her own black thoughts ; but she loves him—loves him—loves every toe of him, and he must love her—just love her blindly, always the same—always the same, Boyah—Boyah ! For oh ! no one in the world, I think, has so much need of love as poor Avis ! ”

And the child was good, and bore with her without remonstrance, though her tears ran down his cheeks and fell upon his pinafore, for the strange woman was gone, and his lifelong friend and worshipper had come back to him.

CHAPTER VII

HAZELL found himself relegated to the bedroom of the dead son for purposes of sleep, whereas he had never felt more broadly awake. As we know, he kept late hours habitually; but the comparatively early time of eleven by the clock did not account for the fact that his whole consciousness was surging tumultuously, and he, the mysterious intangible self that dwells within and sits apart, was tossed by it helplessly, as a row-boat on a chopping sea. He opened the window and began to smoke a pipe; the air was frosty, the sky was dark and starry, and in the east he fancied he could discern the first lightening of a coming moon.

"Confound it all!" he cried to the storm of his nerves, "I might be five-and-twenty. This is what comes of living in solitude. For the last six months I have had no human intercourse, except with a lonely pastoralist or so like myself, and a quiet little family dinner completely upsets me. Most ridiculous! I must go out more or I must not go out at all, and as I have done with women, it had better be not at all. I shall be off to my bachelor camp the first thing to-morrow morning, and stay there till I get used to it. One can get used to anything."

Hazell was no psychologist. He could enjoy, he could suffer, he could rebel, and because he had strength to be silent, he expected of himself strength

enough to destroy. But destruction, to be effectual, must be scientific; not emotional. A second and a third pipe were smoked, and the waning half-moon rose coldly behind the gum-trees, and the smaller stars paled out, and calm reigned all around, and still his soul was vexed within him. The spinning-wheel whirred softly before his mind's eye, and Diana of the golden head sat separate and absorbed behind it, and without word or look she drew his inmost being toward her as the sirens drew the sailors.

"Good God! what's it all about?" he asked himself, desperate, revolting. "What do I want? To *marry* her?" He smiled grimly. "I have had enough of marriage, I think. To love her, or for her to love me? But these are the passions of life with which I have finished. And she a stranger of whom I know nothing, except that she has furious, irrational opinions, whom I guess to have the temper of the devil. Am I always all my life to be ensnared by physical beauty, and stirred to ecstasy by a sheaf of splendid hair? I take my own point of view entirely; there is hers. Would she be likely, with her wit and her youth, to care for me, going on to fogeydom? And if she did, would it be fair? What have I to give her in return for so much—I, a beaten and battered man, who has come off worst in the duel of the sexes? As if she would not naturally choose some shaveling—some fellow, at any rate, who wasn't going bald, who could get his waistcoat-button fastened. What do I want, then? What is it all about? Well, I want peace

in which to do some decent and manly work before I die. I think that is practically all I want."

But the turbulence within continued, vague, violent—that imperious troubling of the waters of soul and body which comes with the birth of love. For the world must go on—it lives but to go on. And the flood-tides of soul and body fret and swell and sink against the walls of circumstance and convention, as we have watched the line of a rough sea against a solid pier. After some hours of sleep Hazell was his own again, but the recollection, and indeed the weariness remaining, determined him to flee temptation. He scribbled a note of apology, went out softly, saddled his horse, and started, he was not sure whither. His excuse had not been quite sincere. True he had written to ask the stock and station agent to come to Burrabindar that morning, but there had been no answer. There was no pressing call for him at home, only the long call of a great neglected stretch of land for all his energies for years. He rode slowly on the main road of Wamagatta, fixing his attention on the excellent detail of all he saw everywhere round him, and once again his spirit died in him. "Put it up for sale and go free," temptation whispered. "Put a bullet through your brains in a quiet spot and hope for a fresh start." "No, I will not die for her worthless sake. She shall never have that satisfaction. I will live and prosper, and she shall know it."

When he reached the parting of the ways he turned his horse toward Beulah, and the sunlight

was yet cool upon the earth as he gained the High Street of the township. It had begun to call itself a town, for its population was increasing rapidly, and it boasted several buildings in brick and stone; there was, moreover, a second street, and Mr. Bolitho had lately endowed this municipality with a small park well planted with young trees, sprinkled with seats and noble with a drinking-fountain. Mostly, of course, the houses were of wood, roofed in grey corrugated iron, and their verandah roofs coloured in red and white stripes, which is so characteristic of Australia. The chief store was kept by Proudfoot, grim father of dead Emily. It consisted of a long barn-like structure in clay, what in other countries would be called adobe; its principal windows, making no more display than of a few sacks of grain and some harness, looked to the street; but "Alexander Proudfoot, General Merchant and Importer," painted above, invited customers to enter and ask indefinitely. Hazell glanced doubtfully at the Exchange Hotel, before which stood a waggon and team, the drivers squatting on their heels smoking. He glanced at the post-office, and debated whether he should enter there for letters which might be awaiting the course of the post. He thought also of stopping at the bank on the chance of a talk with the manager, and finally he dismounted and hitched the reins to the pillar before Proudfoot's door, where he would find a man in disgrace who had known sorrow. Long-lipped, iron-faced, with grey hair brushed straight back from his forehead and touching his collar at

the back, the general merchant stood at his desk busy with books. He looked up as the squatter entered.

"I saw in the paper lately that you were advertising new saddles from England. I want a saddle to try. I am not quite satisfied with those I have," said Hazell.

"Oh ay, ye can see them," was the answer, in broad Lowland Scotch, and the iron-faced one left the desk.

They inspected the stock together, and a choice was made.

"Burrabindar? Oh ay," said the Scotchman, as though the matter was closed, but Hazell was not going to be got rid of so easily.

"If you know as much about all the rest of your business as you know about pigskin, I am not surprised that report calls you a rich man," he said courteously.

"I luik to a' things mysel'. It's the best way," was the answer, and though the tone was dry, there was acknowledgment within it.

"Do you understand the weather, after all your years here?" inquired the customer. "Have you any hopes of rain?"

"Muster Hazell, I leave the weather to the Lord, whose it is," was the answer. "I hae seen nae guid come o' latter-day propheseein', and indeed it's well so. If the puir folk who hae come to this country could ha' foreseen a' they would have to bear from drooght and flood, and the hoping and fearing and ruin after a', the maist o' them would hae left it

and gone elsewhere. That is my opeenion. But it's an ill season for you to arrive, a stranger."

"I hope for something kinder than ruin, anyhow," said Hazell.

"Oh ay. We must all hope. It's juist the breath of life," said the elder man.

Looking at him sharply, the younger wondered what he hoped for.

"I dare say," he said, speaking aloud to his own thoughts, "if one could trace it far enough, one would find that when we cease to hope we come to an end."

Proudfoot made no direct reply. He inquired leisurely: "Wull ye tak' a drenk? I've some grand whisky yon."

"Thank you; I never drink in the morning. Besides, to-day it happens that I've had no breakfast."

"That's ill," said the storekeeper, with greater warmth; "a man should tak' his breakfast."

"I made an early start. I think of calling in at the Exchange Hotel."

Proudfoot hesitated. "It juist happens the day that there's a kirk in a mull at the Excheenge," he said; "the proprietor, Meister Dale, has been taken wi' a fut, I am informed. They'll no do ye verra well there the day. 'Tis a peety, now, and ye a stranger, I think."

"I'll go home, then, and eat the better lunch," said Hazell. "I'm not fastidious." He raised his whip in salute and moved away.

Proudfoot hesitated again. "Gin ye're no fastee-

dious," he said, always in the same deep, dry tones, "I hae a fine ham in cut, and they'll sairve ye within in a meenity. It's ill to begin the day without food."

"You're very kind," replied Hazell, shaking his head, and moved on out, as though there were no more to be said in the matter; and then he thought of the cheerless instalment at Burrabindar, and suddenly turned back into the store. "Thank you; I accept," he said impulsively.

Proudfoot led the way through the long shop, and by a covered wooden passage at the back into his own house. He showed his guest into a sitting-room, furnished with mahogany and horsehair, with a bookcase full of grave volumes, and a rack of long clay pipes.

"Be pleased to tak' a seat," he said solemnly. "Jessie'll no be long, and if there's anything ye require, ye'll say the worrd to hairr, for I maun back to ma wairrk."

Hazell waited for his breakfast in a mood of much amazement. Why in the world had he chosen to accept hospitality from the man who supplied him with harness and poultry-feed—a man, further, whom he had never to his knowledge seen till that morning? He laughed at himself, pelted himself with scorn, and was much minded to escape forthwith to the Exchange, and brave the discomforts of the "kirk in the mill." Meantime, he read the names of the books in the case. "Encyclopædia Britannica," Robertson's "Church History," Scott, Carlyle, and such-like; glanced at the immense pile

of *Weekly Scotsmans*, and found it easy to understand that the daughter of so serious a household, a daughter with the artistic temper, should escape from it, even to the boundary-rider's hut. By and by he was supplied with a repast of excellent ingredients—ham, oatcake, tea, marmalade, and so forth, which he consumed unsparingly. As he rose from the table, and sought in his pocket for a cigar, the merchant returned.

"Upon my word, I do not know how to thank you!" said Hazell, warmed and fed and cheered. "But I have proved before this the generosity of your countrymen."

"We wait till we hae't to be generous wi', that's a'," replied the old man; "and 't wad ha' been a peety for ye to hae gone to the Excheenge Hotel the day."

"Were you ever at Burrabindar?"

"Na, I was niver there."

"If you ever feel like a twelve-mile ride——"

"Ma wairrk keeps me a' the week, Meister Hazell, I thank ye; and on the Lorr'd's day I rest and am thankful."

"If you know as much about everything as you do about ham and saddles and marmalade, I should be glad of your advice on many points, I fancy. I am, unfortunately, so much of a beginner as to be at the mercy of the first comer. There's a tramp-fellow, for instance, living at my expense this very minute because his hands, he says, are all sore with Bathurst burrs. What do I know about Bathurst burrs?"

Hazell was lingering for the sake of talking. Always the same. *Cælum non animum mutavit*—had it not been a joke that he would rather walk with a drummer-boy than alone?

“Bathurst burrs! I know them fine, but I niver heard o’ their incapacitating a man frae his wairrk. A tramp, you say?”

“A tramp; arrived with sore hands, begging work, then begging off work, and showing his wretched paws as reason why I should keep him for nothing.”

“Oh ay, they’re artful, and the maist pairrt will do anything but wairrk. I have heard many ill things of Bathurst burrs, which are one of the Lord’s plagues in New South Wales, but I niver heard o’ their depriving a man o’ the use o’ his hands.”

“I think,” said Hazell, “I’ll send him off. And now I’ll make for home.”

They went to the house-door together. The squatter looked at the brazen horizon, and sighed:

“I’ve only been a few months in the colony, but I’m fairly sick of waiting for the rain.”

“There’s always hope,” said the storekeeper.

“Always, eh?” said Hazell, with a queer twinge of weakness and yearning.

“Always, Meister Hazell, for the hearrt as well as for the hairrvest.”

The squatter held out his hand, and they parted. As he rode he wondered at the dissonance between the aspect and the act of the general importer to the Beulah district. Was it possible that benev-

olence and loving-kindness flourished in so horny a case? And whence the reputed hundred thousand pounds of sterling worth, if free breakfasts were offered to customers? Would he, perhaps, clear the cost of his ham and marmalade through the next gallon of whisky? Somehow Hazell thought not; rather that the old purveyor had liked him. Why, must be for ever unknown, for he would never guess that the breakfast and the friendly words had been given in tenderness to the man who carelessly, curiously, courteously, attended the funeral of the errant daughter. No human creature, unless he had been another Lowland Scot in like circumstances, could have understood his feeling toward his only and beloved child, lost, dead, unrepentant, unforgiven. In all the district, for the moment, there was not one who did not condemn him as an unnatural father. A neutral newcomer was welcome in the circumstance, and when he showed to the sharpened sense of the sore-hearted something of dejection and discouragement of his own, when, moreover, he had stood bareheaded at the girl's grave—that grave in his soil—Proudfoot would have given him greater things than a breakfast.

Riding briskly, Hazell overtook the stock and station agent on his way to Burrabindar, and in the course of talk, recurring in his pertinacious way to the subject of the burrs and the loafer, he met with the same incredulity.

“Might be,” said Tunliffe, “but I never heard of it, not in these parts. Large country, New South Wales—larger than France, they say; plenty of

room for different things to happen, but I take that kind of excuse with a grain of salt myself."

Rennard was found idling, as usual. The inevitable pipe was in his thin, shifty mouth, and he spat and conversed fluently as he watched Soy Ching among the vegetable beds. The Chinaman worked ceaselessly, his lean, supple body bending and swerving at need; the pipe, not in his mouth, but stuck in the back of his leather waist-belt at his spine, ready for the dinner-hour.

"Put us to shame, they do, these yellor fellers," said the stock and station agent. "Don't know what the country'd do without 'em; we'd either not have a green thing to eat, or else have to pay six-pence a bite for it. I'd not say it to every one, Mr. Hazell, but you've been in nigger-lands, they tell me—I'd work the whole of New South Wales with coloured labour if I'd my way."

"Don't stand for the Legislative Assembly, if that is your opinion," returned Hazell, with a laugh, and proceeded to interview Rennard.

The man could give no good account of himself.

"Burrs it was, and Gawd's trewth," he said. "Why 'is pore 'ands was not no better yet was more than he knew. It was labour he wanted—honest labour, and to which he had been born, and any one who knew Luke Rennard could swear to it that he didn't shirk ——"

"You must go and see a doctor," Hazell told him. "I'll give you a letter, if you like, to Mr. Middlemass in Beulah; and, meantime, off you go, and make room for a pair of hands that are of some use."

The tramp showed his teeth, and a sinister light came into his ferret-eyes.

"I can speak for myself to a doctor, or any one else when I choose," he replied insolently, "and I don't want none o' Miss Fletcher's dodges played on *me*. *I* knows where yer been this last twenty-four hours, Mr. Hazell, and I can see it'll suit her well enough to get me out o' the district, but I ain't so easy got rid of, and I've a tongue in my 'ead, I 'ave, as I kin use, if my pore 'ands do fail me. *I* knows all about 'er, and 'er father as turned her out o' doors becos she wasn't fit to stay in no clergyman's 'ouse ——"

The Chinaman worked on unheeding. Tunliffe, the agent, stood in amazement, and Hazell, white with anger, sprang upon the mean creature who spat this extraordinary venom, and cut him heavily across the back and shoulders with his riding-whip.

"Get off my land, you hound!" he ordered fiercely. "Let me catch you here again, and I'll horsewhip you first, and summon you for defamation afterward. Tunliffe, you are a witness."

Rennard yelled with pain, and as the squatter released him, he fell in an abject heap upon the ground, chattering like a monkey.

"Get up and go!" thundered Hazell, standing over him, his nostrils wide, and his pale eyes black with the dilatation of their pupils. "Get up and go!"

Rennard, chattering, eyed the whip, and shrank closer together upon the ground. Hazell moved away, and lowered the threatening weapon. The

tramp leapt beyond his arm's reach, and stood still eyeing him.

"And, mind you, you go a marked man!" cried the squatter, in tremendous tones. "Every police-inspector for fifty miles round shall hear of you!"

At the word, Rennard turned and fled, running low, with bounds and jumps, like a terrified animal, and was lost to sight among the trees of the paddock. The Chinaman, sitting unconcernedly by the trenches, was busy clearing away small leaves and suckers of celery. If he had noticed at all what was taking place, he had already ceased from any interest in it. The agent's amazement was too great for speech; he gazed round-eyed, alarmed at the passion of the big man beside him, and Hazell, seeing this, drew a deep breath, and made an effort for composure.

"I am glad," he said, "that only you and I, Mr. Tunliffe, were here. John hardly counts. You and I know how to respect a lady's name, and this astounding incident will never be heard of again. Now, shall we go and look at those wethers?"

CHAPTER VIII

THE drought continued. September was more than half over, and the outlook in the country was as bad as it had ever been known to be, even in a land of alternate drought and flood. For the moment in the Beulah district there was no lack of water in the creeks, and Rennard's place had been taken by a man who journeyed to and from creek and garden with a cart and horse, fulfilling the requirements of Soy Ching. Hazell knew himself comparatively fortunate, for he could still enjoy his daily parboiling, and still the tub on the shelf in the bath-room was daily supplied for the ensuing douche. Elsewhere, matters were different. From far west came families driven out by water famine; from further north came true stories of households which could get drink, but had ceased to wash, and on all sides the failing live-stock crawled feebly about paddocks as bare as a desert, or starved in paddocks where scorched, sapless herbage stood white and valueless in the hard-baked soil. It seemed as though three years of insufficient rain were about to culminate in unrelieved ruin for a pastoralist community.

For Hazell, the worst of all the long-drawn agony was the enforced inaction. Not only was there nothing to be done, but there was nothing to do. If he had been a millionaire he could not have fed

and watered 50,000 sheep, with cattle and horses, scattered over a run twelve or thirteen miles long and about half as broad. Given the labour, the necessary fodder was unprocurable, even at famine prices. Every homestead in the colony wanted hay and corn for such animals as were indispensable for draught and carriage, for consumption, and these were poorly kept at excessive cost. The man who had a precious field of capricious Lucerne grass was the only man who was making money.

Hazell rode among his dying flocks, growing weaker day by day, and heard with despair the opulent triumph of the carrion-crows. His lambs died as they were born, and the exhausted ewes died with them. Sick with the stench of the bodies, which polluted all the wide, sunny air, he had them raked together and burnt—a pitiable loss! He had scores of the weakest shot or knocked on the head for the sake of their fleeces, that some trifle might be saved from the general destruction. Live sheep might be bought anywhere for leagues about at a few pence a head.

Burrabindar, as we know, had been neglected for years past, and carried very little first-rate stock, only a small number of rams and ewes required artificial feeding. There was nothing to do but look on. The improvements to the property for which the new master was so anxious were out of the question. One cannot burn off dead timber when a chance spark may cause a fire miles long, nor plant ornamental trees in ground as dry as tinder and as hard as a solid rock. And day after day the

unwelcome sun arose punctually, and shone as brightly as he could through every possible minute, as though his were the most desired of presences, and departed in glory. And night after night the frost was keen on the bloodless earth, and daily and nightly each was more injurious.

One morning a visitor arrived at eight o'clock, expecting breakfast; he was a small, dark fellow, young, and bright-eyed, with a pleasant, careless manner—Caradon Bolitho.

"Thought you'd be getting pretty sick of this, new-chum, and all alone," said he in a friendly way. "Thought I'd come over and be neighbourly."

Hazell apologised for the deficiencies of his bill of fare. There were neither eggs nor butter, and the milk was of the poorest quality.

"Oh dear me, I know all about it," said Caradon. "I've lived through this kind of thing before. Of course, we're better off at Wamagatta—better prepared, you know, plenty of tanks and dams; and my mother took possession of a little arm of the Tunga River twenty years ago, and made it into a private stream of our own. Great idea, that, of hers. Dare say the authorities will kick up about it some day. These frosts beat me, though. Spring frosts are damnation to the pastoralist, neither more nor less. We are bound to lose heavily, in spite of all our precautions, and as for you—why, it's rough on you, I must say."

"Well, there's only myself to suffer," said Hazell.

"That's good as far as it goes," replied Caradon. "But, if I may say so, I think a man is happiest

married. Keeps him steady, makes him work in a more definite way, you know. I wouldn't be single again."

Hazell bowed. Fresh supplies were brought for the visitor's consumption, and he fell upon them with fine appetite.

"I hope you mean to be one of us and do your duty in the colony," said he as he ate and drank. "We always allow ourselves great hopes of a new-comer. You'll be asked to join several things—Boards and Councils and so forth, of course; and I am here, among other reasons, to invite you to become a member of the Polo Club. Polo is my hobby—that and sheep-breeding."

"I am too heavy for the one, though not, I hope, for the other," said Hazell, smiling.

"Well, you're heavier than I am, certainly," said the young man, looking at his host critically. "I turn the scale at ten stone."

"I don't own to more than fifteen," said Hazell jocularly.

"I knew a man—a Sydney man—who rode fifteen stone and did some of the best play I have ever seen in my life," answered Caradon earnestly; "but you'd soon be down to thirteen if you'd ride over regularly to our practices and play them honestly through."

"On a motor-car? I am a quiet old stager nowadays. The *rushes* of life are over for me."

"They say, Mr. Hazell, that you have been a soldier."

Hazell bowed, admitting it.

"My brother Eldred is a gunner." Hazell bowed again. "Have you ever seen any active service?"

"I always had the bad luck to miss it," said Hazell, and got up and stood before the fire.

Caradon, full of curiosity, felt that he could not press further, but he looked with admiration. The figure was grand in spite of the coming heaviness; the face was strong and manly; he gave the impression of one who had seen the wide world and was not afraid of it.

"I have come here to be quiet and useful and get old with dignity," said Hazell, in his quick way.

"Well, there isn't much adventure in these settled parts," Caradon admitted. "Bushranging and gold-fever and fights with the natives are all over, as far as we are concerned. We get up a bit of sport now and then, a day after brush-turkeys or so, but it's a calm life enough, unless you call droughts exciting. Very good spiced beef, I must say."

They rode about the run together, Caradon talking cheerfully, full of anecdote and information. A wild weak fancy awoke in Hazell's mind—to advertise for a "colonial experimenter," on the chance of securing the companionship of such another intelligent chatterbox, who might save him from many stormy hours of thought. The fancy was checked at birth. He drew his new friend's attention to a gully at hand, where a little water ran steadily.

"Do you see this? It puzzles me," he said. "A month ago this was dry. For a week or so past

there has been a small, brisk stream in it. I can hear of no drop of rain for miles. I have seen no trace of mist on the hills behind, and yet there is water here where there was none."

"It's the same with us. It's one of the odd things in this country of mine that strangers call so all-round odd. Sort of thing people write to the papers about every dry season, I believe."

"Well, but the reason?"

"No one rightly knows, of course. Never do rightly know any reason for anything, it seems to me—at least, scientific people never do."

"Why, no," said Hazell, laughing. "I have often noticed that one advantage of being a man of science is that you can say you don't know anything about anything without being considered an ass."

"Ah, good!" cried Caradon. "I shall carry that to my mother. She loves a smart saying. But seriously, Mr. Hazell, they say, some of 'em, that it's the extreme contraction of the ground, the shrinkage, you know, because of the shocking dryness, and there's always water somewhere, it seems, and it is forced up. Do you see?"

"I see; thanks."

"They give other reasons, too, but this is about the simplest of them, and you will notice in the summer another queer habit of our water-courses: they'll run free in the morning and evening, when the sun isn't so powerful, and about noon they go slow, not half the size. Why, I hear there's a neat little gully full of water on Brooksby burst out

lately where there hasn't been a sign of moisture within the memory of the oldest inhabitant."

They ate their sandwiches together, and Hazell promised to become a vice-president of the Polo Club, and to spend a day shortly at Wamagatta in the entertainment of its manager; but the latter lamented to his wife that an agreeable companion and an experienced sportsman seemed inclined to stand aloof from local things and bury himself in his arid hermitage.

"Close as death about himself, too, and yet one can see he would be interesting if he only would," he added.

"I suppose he is sure not to dance," said the wife, a languid Victorian, who worshipped Terpsichore by nature and nationality.

"I'll put any money on it he doesn't," was the reply.

The weekly services at the little district church saw nothing of the master of Burrabindar. He spent Sundays in his sitting-room reading many newspapers, writing a few letters, and, from old habit, dipping into one or more of the various books which he had once studied with a view to self-improvement, or to advancement in the profession he had once adored. Hazell had entered Rugby late in his boyhood, and his early years had been divided between French and German schools. He knew both languages well; he had a smattering of Russian and of one or two dialects of Hindostanee; musketry and military commissariat had attracted him, and he had delighted in the war

game. No man of his standing had been more resolved on advancement, nor better prepared for it, yet here he was, arms and men alike laid aside, awaiting the long pleasure of Nature.

"It might be a siege, it might be solitary confinement on parole, but it might be worse; it might be that year over again!" he wrote one Sunday, in a letter addressed to Thomas Hazell, Esq., of Hazell and Co., Colonial Brokers, Fenchurch Street, E.C.

One day he took his unwilling horse up and down and along the steep stony hills that formed his eastern boundary. The gum-trees, starved out, showed lines of dead white leaves among the green-grey forest monotone. Here and there a wallaby bounded far and fast at his approach, or a kangaroo-rat sprang wildly up as from under him, and startled the animal he rode. All day heavy clouds had brooded southwest in the sky, and he had fancied occasional lightning flashes among them, but he noticed them almost without hope, so often had they gathered in such fashion and broken away fruitlessly. It is the tantalisation of drought that great curtains of moisture float and hang continually over longing heads, only to disappear. An unseasonably warm wind had swept the land for two or three days before, but it had sunk and left the air extraordinarily still. Hazell reined in his horse for some time, looking at the scene around him and below. Great plains on which the trees grew gradually fewer, till an invading brown desert stretched supreme, lay to the west. In the dry at-

mosphere human sight went far—hills twenty miles distant seemed within an hour's ride; the gleam of a creek showed from leagues away. The landscape was almost colourless, even the sky whitish; a patch of the spring green of England laid down on any part of it would have stood out in contrast as sharp as a lighthouse in the night.

He stood at the extreme end of the run; his own homestead was lost to sight in the low spurs of the range northward; southward he could distinguish the little wooden home of Mrs. Mumford, whose guinea-fowl had strayed to serve his table. Of human life on any side there was not a glimpse; so solitary might Adam have stood on the hills of Eden surveying his inheritance, but Adam in a garden bounded by rivers, and this man in a wilderness of dry bones. He was tired. In determination to reach the highest and utmost edge of Burabindar, he had ridden some time into the afternoon. He dismounted, loosened the girths, and tethered his horse to a convenient trunk; then, having eaten his spare lunch, he lay down to sleep. He awoke to so strange and awful a sunset that he seemed to be dreaming still. South and west a tenth of the heavens displayed a wild extravagance of splendour and menace; a massed purple blackness supplied a background to hard billows of intense dark blue, which lay upon it in higher relief; below, between the cloud line and the land line, was a glorious vaporous veil of every shade of golden and orange brilliancy, lit by the hidden sun above, and flying columns of cloud—black, brown-

ish, bronzed or gilded, as from their position their waves caught the light or not; the rays of the buried fire streamed off in all directions up the sky, and down upon the earth, and seemed to hurry toward the hill on which he stood, amazed, admiring, half in dread. As he questioned what to do, what spot might be the safest to avoid the onslaught which must immediately come, he saw small whirling objects against the shimmering transparency of veil, and a roar of distant wind reached his ears. The whirling things increased in size; big boughs and then whole trees flew agonised across the veil. The roar grew louder, mixed with sharp sounds of cracking and a general stir of breaking substance. The little wooden house of the manager of Brooksby was struck, and the roof carried off, and closed out-buildings were overturned, like leaves or cards, by the unseen violence that passed over them. A few tiny human beings, running out like ants, fell and lay like shreds or seeds upon the ground. A cold storm-breath gained himself and made him clutch his hat, and then the veil, no longer glorious, but of mist and rain, rushed upon him and blotted out the scene of ruin. He dragged the horse, hurrying as fast as it would follow, down the lee side of the height, and they stood together in the shelter of a limestone boulder while the outer edge of the cyclone swept the ridge, and the forest swayed and snapped above, and a solid sea of water drenched them.

The worst was over in a minute. The circle of destruction had but touched him; he waited shiver-

ing, blinded by rain, confused by wind, till the day was past and the short twilight gave early place to a night of settled downpour. He started home slowly, letting the horse for the most part take its own way. No longer danger, but discomfort remained, the discomfort of clothes soaked in water, heavy and cold on the body, of a saddle soft and slippery, of unavailable tobacco in a sodden pouch. The two creeks that crossed his road were running fairly high, but so far there was nothing like flood on Burrabindar, and, inasmuch as he could judge in the gloom, and infer from the trend of the storm, his property had escaped serious damage.

The drought was over: rain fell in solemn-sounding torrents.

CHAPTER IX

HAZELL devoted several following days to the demands of fever, the poll-tax of Anglo-Indians. While the rain roared around, he lay alternately tossing and prostrate in his dark, lonely room, from which the wide verandah-roof shut out the sight and the light of the low grey sky. He physicked himself from choice, but also from necessity, for no medical aid could have been called across the turbulent water-courses which raged between him and Beulah, even if the horse or the cart of the most robust practitioner could have surmounted the deep vertical inches of mud, the intervals of bog, the boughs, tree-trunks, and other obstacles which strewn what in fair weather was a tolerable Bush road.

When he again stepped out, somewhat feeble, into the sunshine, the soil was brown where it had been white, and a sheet of tender, pervading green lay over the whole face of it. The pastoralist future was no longer a hope, it was a certainty. Loss there would be, even to the half of the flocks; but it could be borne. Life, insistent, unconquerable, eternal, was warm in the gently-reeking earth, was triumphant in the chord of the magpies, the screech of the cockatoo, the lowing and bleating of the cattle in the yards. Convalescent, with that dulness of the brain and that stir of the emo-

tions which accompany returning health, as though with greater weakness one's body took the perilous path of least resistance, Hazell felt himself also warm, and the spring was in his veins also. The past was not forgotten, but it might come to be unnoticed; the old line of life, of thought, of circumstances, was neither broken nor cancelled, but a new line might run unhindered by its side—the substance to its shadow. Reviving energy swept to and fro in him, the light fluid mass of it taking shape from time to time of Avis Fletcher. She visited his thoughts like a ghost. Now she would stand radiant with a promise of joy, like a golden figure of dawn in a virgin world; now she galloped before him on a flying horse, a vision of achievement or of fame; now she sat spinning, spinning, and the calm of sweetest peace, of evening rest, was the essence of the song of her wheel.

Suddenly he remembered the odious shriek of Rennard. It had escaped his memory in the cares of the immediate days, in the depressing illness, but it came back to him with an intensity of wonder and suspicion, with amazement that he should have forgotten a thing so outrageous. The accusation was horrible! Was there foundation for it, however slight? or did it spring entirely from the malignancy of a low creature balked in an attempt at fraud, with perhaps a criminal record for his past, which he feared might be known by her whom he claimed to know? Hazell pondered. He could not put the question by. He answered it in every conceivable way—with indignant repudiation, with in-

genious substantiation. He considered her from fresh points of view, critically examining each detail of which he was in possession. There were her dignity, her beauty, her noble, if mistaken, enthusiasm of sympathy for the poor dead girl Emily, and for the sufferings of her sex. Hazell knew, as all men know, that woman has fair cause of complaint against man and against society. He knew that it was required of her to be an exquisite kind of paradox—good and pure, steadfast in her constancy, and yet abundant in a piquant sauce of coquetry and wiles; and should the one part predominate, she is heavy, unattractive; and should the other, she is light, unworthy. To be fascinating—the reason of her being—she must maintain unstable equilibrium. Man, were he asked to do this, would refuse the endless effort. Miss Fletcher's expressions on the subject of her sex were easy to be understood, Hazell decided, and to be written down to the account of that undying protest of youth against whatever seems to it wrong. And yet, why her seclusion on the fringe of civilisation? There was no hint of present ill-health; no threat of lung or other disease. Why had she left her English home? and why, here, did she avoid her own kind, who would so willingly make her life delightful with all that women are supposed to value? The world abounds in men who ask for nothing so much as an occasion of petting and enjoying beauty. Had she not, then, against this world some private cause of passionate resentment? If so, did this Rennard know it? Hazell reviewed the circumstances of

their first meeting. He could remember no sign that she had remarked the man. He recollected the refinement of her surroundings, and the recollection baffled him, for he could associate nothing discreditable with Mr. or Mrs. Bolitho. He thrust aside suspicion; it returned, it embittered his days of gathering strength, for the realm of guess is as wide as the mind that begets it, and contains no certainty but vexation. He felt that he must see her soon. He told himself that his large experience of women would judge her unerringly. A meeting, a few searching looks, a little well-directed observation, would show him the kind of person he dealt with. But, again, why? Oh, maddening fixity of an active mind brooding through lonely days! Oh, detestable and unchivalrous curiosity! In any case whatever, how did it concern him? Was it not enough that he had met with kindness in the house where she lived? And what was the manner of man who had accused her? A human ferret, a rat, for instant dislike and extrusion. So Hazell struggled with the unruly kingdom of his thoughts.

The local newspaper set forth a polo match to be played on the coming Saturday between the teams known as Beulah and Blowye. The ground of the first named was to be the place of meeting. A newly-elected vice-president owed some courtesy to the society; it might be a good opportunity to make his first public appearance in the neighbourhood. Miss Fletcher, from her love of horsemanship, might be among the onlookers, and he might meet her on neutral ground.

Although the sun had reigned undisputed with increasing heat for more than a week, the roads were still heavy with mud, and he drove in a sulky, supplied with great-coat and rugs against the chill of the evening, and told himself he was an old fogey as he did so.

A broad, cleared paddock was given up to the game. It was rather high ground, and the flat surface was sufficiently dry and in order for its purpose. A small crowd of onlookers held one side, with a mixture of vehicles and riding-horses—disorderly, unpicturesque; a small, dingy British crowd. On the other side rough grooms held smart polo ponies, and coats and bundles of polo-sticks lay together about the fence. It was a brilliant afternoon. The white shirts of the players ready for play gleamed on the field, and as he drew nearer his eye took a sense of something golden, which quickened the blood in his veins, and unconsciously, from long habit of control, he steadied his fingers on the reins, and brought his thoroughbred to a walk, looking elsewhere—at the low eastern hills, at the lower line of the township—until he had driven slowly up behind the small group of people. There had been no need, for the moment, of closer attention. What he came to see was there. Miss Fletcher sat with Mrs. Bolitho in a light buggy, and watched the match. Except themselves, he knew no one there, but he felt that all knew him. Had there been any doubt as to the name of the broad-shouldered, soldier-like stranger who appeared in so small a community, his sulky, long identified with

Burrabindar, would have told them who he was, and he noticed a little stir among the several ladies—under a score—who for a moment faced him, behind, more interesting than the fight before them.

Miss Fletcher wore a cream-coloured cloth jacket and a blue silk tie, and there was a blue band round her sailor-hat. Hazell perceived that Caradon Bolitho, slim and wiry, in a blue cap, was playing "back" against the Reds of Blowye—playing by far the best of any man on either side. The familiar cries, the familiar thud and beat of galloping feet, bore him away to India and past days of just such delicious excitement. So had he shouted, so had he hustled his adversary and swept the ground, and stooped and reached and made brave, risky strokes for the joy of the doing and the praise of one whose praise—had it ever been really his? A curse rose in his throat; the surging in his brain blinded his eyes. "Fool!" he thought furiously. "Fool to come here! Get home with you!"

A rider came cantering past him on his way to replace a broken stick from his reserve supply. "Time" was called, and Hazell recovered calmness to find Mrs. Bolitho looking round from her carriage and smiling on him. Handing the reins to his man, he went to speak to her on foot. She was among the foremost of the spectators, and as he stepped between the vehicles, the whole district, as it were, had a good view of the new squatter, a person presumably of some wealth and without encumbrance, who had come to make his home among them. Marriage is, it may be said, more highly esteemed

in a young country than in an old, or it may seem so, because general conversation turns upon it more candidly. He was an interesting possibility, an object of conjecture to every woman present, and there was not one who did not conjecture something, contrive something, weave something in her mind as he stood beside the ladies from Wamagatta. Mrs. Bolitho gave him her hand, but Miss Fletcher, who sat beyond her, met him only with a bow; yet he smiled, as it were, involuntarily, and remained smiling, with an occasional glance at her while he gave some account of his late illness to Mrs. Bolitho. She had seen that kind of smile many times on many faces, all of them masculine. It is a weak smile, self-conscious, with an impression on the features that they had had to yield to it, yet that there has been joy and satisfaction in yielding.

“I’ve known men twice as bad as myself,” said he quickly, in words which bore no reference to his expression of countenance. “One poor chap in particular I remember, who used to get attacks from time to time. Half an hour after the fever was on him he would be so prostrate that he could not rise from the bed or ground or wherever he happened to be lying. I remember one day, when his syce was out ——”

Two young women—slight, supple beings in well-worn riding habits—came up to speak to Mrs. Bolitho. They had small, thin faces, brown, indeterminate, of a quaint and impertinent sort. They held out tiny flexible hands in shabby gauntlets. In lands where riding is a necessity ornamental gear

is not expected. Hazell was introduced to the Miss Railtons of Brooksby; but the play began again, and he turned to watch it.

"Ah! Red three has made a mistake," he exclaimed. "That was a fine run of his down the side, but he had plenty of time to take a pull and make a shot for goal, instead of smacking the ball behind."

"You are speaking of my brother," said the younger, Annie Railton. "They say he is a better horseman than hitter."

"Often the case," Hazell agreed, and then added politely: "You are all such horsemen in this country!"

"So you must think, I'm sure," put in her sister, May. "Here you see us, your neighbours on one side, for the first time, in habits; and did not Miss Fletcher, who is a kind of neighbour on the other, ride over to welcome you before any one else?"

The girl laughed maliciously, and looked pointedly at Avis, to whom she had so far said nothing. Hazell saw her start very slightly, and with the instinct of shielding her, he rushed in with a retort:

"How did you know that? Were you also beleaguered and thirsty in the home paddock of what was supposed to be an empty house? If so, why didn't you come in, too? Your charity is not equal to Miss Fletcher's, or shall I say your menage?"

The girl tossed her head.

"I don't know about charity," she answered, "but I shan't tell you how I heard it. One hears

everything in the Bush somehow—everything there is to be heard.”

She raised her voice in emphasis, and looked at Avis again pointedly.

Avis looked back attentively. Her complexion was not of the kind that changes easily, and there was neither flush nor pallor to show that she was in any way affected; but Hazell, as though in mysterious sympathy with her, felt the sudden bound in her veins, and his eyes caught the flicker of a pulse in her throat between the collar and the ear.

Mrs. Bolitho, aware immediately of what is known as feline amenity, descended swiftly on the girl who had introduced it.

“Pray, how do you know that you hear everything? I think it most likely that there is a great deal more you do not hear and never know anything at all about.”

“For instance,” put in Hazell, still conscious of the beating pulse, “there’s that wonderful thing they will never discover—that cosmo veil—which would revolutionise the whole of human movement, which would be the most marvellous discovery known to history. You’ve heard nothing of that, of course.”

“Cosmo veil?” May Railton repeated doubtfully; then hastily: “How could I have heard of a thing they will never discover?—or you either, Mr. Hazell? You are making fun of me. Of course, I don’t mean that kind of thing at all. I mean that what people don’t want known about themselves comes out, sooner or later.”

"I quite think it does," said Mrs. Bolitho, in the frankest of indifferent tones; "and the moral of the matter is this: Whatever you have done—good, bad, or indifferent—stick to it. The world takes one mostly at one's own valuation."

"Unluckily for those who suffer from insufficient self-confidence," Hazell agreed with her. "And there are such."

Inwardly he wrote down Miss May Railton as a poisonous social insect, and wondered if it were just possible that some of her venom was meant for him. Yet it was surely not possible; her reference had been distinctly to Miss Fletcher.

"Are you one of the self-depreciators, Mr. Hazell?" asked her sister.

"I leave the matter to you and to time and to the revelations of the Bush," he replied solemnly. "As a newcomer, I am greatly obliged to you both. On your authority, I shall refuse to answer any questions concerning myself; it would be superfluous."

"Bravo, back! Well played!" cried Avis, in a clear, ringing voice, looking at the field.

"Is that my Caradon? I am an unworthy mother! What did he do?" said Mrs. Bolitho.

"A splendid back-hander on the near side—placed the ball perfectly. Goal! Bravo!"

"I suppose you are not coming to the Bachelors' Ball next week, Miss Fletcher?"

A big man of jovial air, accompanied by an equally well-nourished wife, came up and saluted the party in detail in hearty tones.

She shook her head.

"I think not, Dr. Middlemass."

May Railton demanded suddenly, in a tone that was shrill with excitement :

"Did you ever go to balls in Southamptonshire, Miss Fletcher?"

Hazell saw his Diana wince, and under her veil her face became strange ; in the colour of her cheek and that of her hair, which usually blended in the most satisfying way, there seemed a startling discordance, and the brown eyes with their lines of curling lashes, and the straight brow above, seemed to have grown on the instant much darker, and hard in their effect.

Instinctively Hazell moved round to her side of the carriage.

"My God!" he cried inwardly ; "if I could break that Railton girl across my knees!"

But the pause was short—no more than might be explained by astonishment at so unexpected a reference—before Avis answered steadily :

"Sometimes."

Mrs. Middlemass seemed to wait upon the word, and her husband also, through his professional good-humour, gave a shrewd ear, and both the Misses Railton were in a breathless gasp of attendance. Mrs. Bolitho looked round on them all in amazement. Her quick mind made a pictorial group of the scene. The keen inquisitive little sisters in shabby riding-habits, excitement blended of fear and spite in their little indeterminate countenances ; the comfortable, prudent citizen couple,

who loved a current tale, but were not prepared to dare anything for the truth of it ; and Avis, vivid, detached, so quiet, though so intensely living, suddenly more than ever a creature apart, a mark for arrows winged by malice. By her side, too, most noticeable of all, stood the stranger, erect and easy, the mature knight plainly at her service.

"They are playing again," said Mrs. Bolitho, to change the position, to relieve Avis, to get time to think. Hazell cared nothing further for the polo. The play had lost its interest in comparison with the bitter social by-play which he recognised, hated, and resented as a man who had lived among it and suffered from it.

A society is no doubt best, but there are hours when one pictures the superior advantages of an uncommunicative, armed individuality, wherein one's will should be the law and alien comment capital. Hazell, from dire experience, was quick to perceive the stings of drawing-room talk, and having come in search of Avis with inquisitorial purpose of his own, he found himself her involuntary liege and henchman. Who should say but that there were lies concerning her, as there had been lies concerning him ? He glanced at her. He felt her nailed to a cross of seemly endurance.

"An excellent sport," he said pleasantly. "But it has this fault to an onlooker ; the interest does not necessarily culminate toward the end. One would often enjoy it most if one left half-way through."

Miss Fletcher turned to him. The fixity of her features startled him. She answered still steadily :

"Every public thing is more or less tiresome, don't you think? And polo is a time game; like life, the best of it is often at the beginning, but if one does not wait for the end, though there's nothing to be got by doing so, the world calls one a coward."

"The world is a hass; but there is one thing which seems certain to a stranger, Miss Fletcher: that you need never mind anything its hass-hood may chance to say."

"Why?" The attitude of either was conventional. A line drawn upward from the wheel would not have touched him, her arm was well within the curve of the rail, yet their minds, drawn forcibly together, met in an exquisite satisfaction. He spoke in an uncontrollable desire to uphold, to praise, to cherish, saying anything that came first; she answered anything that had a coherent sound, and for the moment she trusted herself to him against the world as one has seen a child's head lie in a protecting hand, as one has felt the sweep of the wind in our sail urge on our waters.

"Why?" she asked, with a smile of relaxation and content.

"When a woman has beauty and wit and courage and freedom, what can hurt her? Who would hurt her?"

"Every one can be hurt—except those who cannot feel, and loss of feeling is nothing else than death."

"Well, I am glad I am not dead yet."

"Are you? It is not a race, you know, it is only polo."

"So much the better; one may get one's goal earlier."

"Or several goals?"

His face clouded. "There is always one that is best," he cried.

Mrs. Bolitho rounded on them as though she had taken for granted their interest in the field.

"Poor Caradon! game for Blowye!" she cried, and looked them through with an intelligent flash.

"I am proud of being vice-president," said Hazell, with great determination and questionable logic.

"You are certainly loyal," replied Mrs. Bolitho, with a laugh. "The ladies take it in turns on these occasions to quench the public thirst, Mr. Hazell, by billy-tea made in the corner near the sticks." Her eye sought that of Avis, found it, and continued: "You will make acquaintance with all the rest of the company over your cup. I am an old woman, and evening damp does not suit me. Miss Fletcher is very good to me, and will drive me home straight away."

"The sun sets," said Hazell, looking at Avis.

The elder lady's face was caught in a spasm of laughter. "It will rise again," she said reassuringly. "Would you mind putting my shawl round my shoulders?"

Avis had her hands full of whip and rein. She meant to bow in farewell, but as their eyes met

with a shock to her, she could not so much as smile. Words were impossible; how could she bear to leave him? Yet let her fly to the uttermost parts of the earth, so that they never met again.

CHAPTER X

RALPH HAZELL had begun a new chapter in the book of his life, and he wrote it in words as clear, as emphatic, as single of purpose as though it had been the first chapter of all. The letters were luminous with hope, the page was ornate with romance. Europe and the complications and elaborations of it, India and the highly-coloured symbolisms, the worn ambition of it, were nothing to him; Australia held his whole treasure, and it was the promised land. The Bush was no longer a desert bringing forth the grotesque; it was a virgin country, whose pallor was the delicacy of the dawn, whose monotony best awaited enrichment, wherein dwelt one man and one woman, and the woman beyond praise. She had no fault; she had no flaws; like the Parthenon, she convinced at first sight of her perfections, and surely, surely she was his! There are moments which admit of no mistake. Such had been these when he stood by her side, and their souls had flowed into each other, like rivers that meet. Come change, come death, come anything, she had been his then; either could have put out a hand and said, "Let us go," and the other would have companied obediently to the end of the world. It was overwhelming, it was a dream of Olympian beauty, but it was true, and he accepted it. Hazell's eye was as single as his heart was

strong; when he was fixed nothing shook him; when he yielded he gave everything. He had no doubt that she gave equally. It was as though they had stood together on the bank of a great stream, and with fingers interlocked had plunged into it together; henceforward, swimming or drifting, their course was one. It was himself she loved, and not his past, not his fortune, for she knew nothing of either of them; it was herself he loved, for his ignorance of her circumstances was no less than hers of his; but love takes the place of all wisdom, and the man who has been widely called the wisest declared wisdom to be a loving spirit.

Hazell's pen served him but unwillingly, and he sent no letter. Business arose and kept him to his bounds for a full week, but he bore it tolerably; the hours flew, if the minutes lagged, the glare of happy certainty remaining with him. When he could present himself, there should be words enough, utterance, publication, establishment of any kind she pleased; some regard for the world, through all his disdain of it, urged him to mark her for his own as soon as possible. Some respect for its hideous possibilities suggested that the sooner the better he should be generally known as her guard and henchman. They had a common grievance, it seemed, when he thought of the unexplained insolence of the Railton girl, against the vile tongue of the world; but he thought of it little, there was so much else brighter to engage, for instance, his evenings, when he encouraged a vision of the spinning-wheel, in the

hands of the golden worker, murmuring at his fire-side; or his mornings, when he fancied her comradeship riding radiant through the grey scene. He checked his thoughts, however, making virtue of necessity, and worked for Burrabindar in these days with an exuberance of energy and imagination. It must be worthy of her. He went throughout the house, projecting alterations; he captured wandering men, putting them to burn off timber; he reviewed his stock, picturing a series of prize rams—Golden Fleece I., Golden Fleece II., and so on. He made inquiries for a second Chinese gardener, that there might be beautiful surroundings for her when she came. Never was man more sanguine. When the jackasses laughed at sunset, he laughed with them. Mrs. Brock noticed a difference in him; the sternness of his look had softened and the somewhat mechanical cheeriness of a well-mannered man showed a sparkle of genuine gladness.

On the eighth day he found himself at liberty to ride forth and take heaven by force. He dressed with especial care. His coat and gaiters were almost new, his horse, the youngest and most showy in his stables, had been lately clipped. He went by way of the township, partly that he might spend his morning no otherwise than on the road to Avis, partly that he might submit his head and beard for the trimming of the barber. He tried to ride slowly, but the grey was high-fed and responded smartly to the impatience of his mood; miles were as nothing: he was in Beulah before the sun was high. The barber had no other customer; his in-

considerable lunch required so little preparation from the staff of the Exchange Hotel that it was in process of digestion by noon—three hours at least before that of polite intrusion. It was ceremonious, his purpose at Wamagatta, not the usual Bush visitation. Time hung on his hands. There was a billiard-room, but the marker was away. There was a bank-manager, but he was occupied. There was neither court nor market in process ; a duller residential hole could not be dreamed of. Hazell drifted idly into the general store, where the iron-faced importer stood as usual at the desk.

“I liked that saddle,” said the squatter pleasantly. “It fitted me well, for a ready-made affair. When you get in any more, you might let me have another like it.”

Proudfoot made a solemn note of the suggestion.

“Ye’ve been ill, I hear,” he said.

“You hear everything, of course. Every one hears everything in country districts. Different look about things to-day from the morning when I ate your breakfast.”

“There’s just as different a look about yersel’, Mister Hazell ; you’re not the same man.”

Hazell laughed.

“I took your advice and hoped.”

“Do ye always take advice sae kindly ?”

“A man of my size is naturally weak-minded, easily influenced either way ; but though a prophet had counselled it, I don’t think there would have been much kick left in me, if I had had to watch my stock starve for many weeks longer. I had cut

down half my she-oaks for them as it was; sheep seem able to eat anything."

"Ay, even airth—even their ain lambs."

"I don't know why, but a cannibal sheep seems even more monstrous than a cannibal man. No one has ascertained, I suppose, if the taste of his own species is as delicious to a sheep as to a man; but grass must be very insipid afterward. That little package is for Wamagatta, I see. I am going there—shall I take it?"

"Na, na; no need. A waggon-load will be awa' to them the day——"

Proudfoot paused. Hazell chose a cigar from his case very leisurely, cut the end of it, prodded it to make it draw well, lighted it carefully, and passed it backward and forward under his nose, inhaling the smoke critically.

"As ye're for Wamagatta, ye might tak' a word to Miss Fletcher," said the Scotchman in a tone of peculiar dryness. The cigar ceased to move. "I doot she's no over-fond o' adveece, for she's a head-strong leddy, but it's a true word. Tell her, from Alexander Proudfoot, she has an enemy in the deestriect wi' an ill tongue."

"Who is it?" asked Hazell quickly.

"A puir creature enough, but for the malice o' him, and but for the love o' the human heart hearin' evil o' their nabors."

"A man, then?"

"Ay. A daunderin' wastrel, a sundowner by's luiks."

"A rat, a mere ha'porth of manhood, with a

crafty gallows face, all blotches?" asked the squatter vehemently.

"The verra mon!" answered Proudfoot.

"I guessed it. He calls himself Luke Rennard. It was he who loafed a week at my expense because his hands were inflamed with burrs. I told him to go. He replied with some scurrile insolence about—Miss Fletcher. I laid my whip across his shoulders and sent him flying. Does he scatter his accusation broadcast? Where is he?"

"I dinna keer where he is. He spoke openly and with many details during a nicht or twa in the Swan with Two Necks. Now, there is no reason, Master Hazell, but quite the contrary, that this man's licht word should be taken against a ledgy weel known and respectit in the town; but—she has beauty, Master Hazell, and she's prood and superior, and bides aloof, and there's those that canna forgie mon or woman that bides aloof. If ye're a friend o' hers——"

"I hope I am," Hazell interrupted. "At all events, I shall see to it that this scoundrel is brought to book. I feel, you see, in a measure responsible for him, as it was on my land she came in contact with him, and I have a special hatred for slander and gossip of every degree. I would make the ninth commandment as vital as the seventh, Mr. Proudfoot, and it should be held as much every man's duty to hunt down a backbiter as it now is to disclose a murder. I believe, indeed, that there have been more broken hearts from false witness than from murder."

A family drove up the street in a one-horse cart and stopped before them. The father got down and advanced on the general store, three or four children, aged from two to seven years, presided over the reins and the jaded steed. Hazell's cigar went out. He threw it away, chose another, and puffed hastily, without refinement of savour. "A kittle pair," thought Proudfoot; and as the squatter mounted his shining grey, and took the street at an impressive trot, he added to himself: "A braw pair." For, inasmuch as they had stood together in good sympathy by the grave of his daughter, the old man hoped that they might walk together in full sympathy while life should last.

Hazell's expansive mood had received no check. His purpose was quickened to a yet sharper point by confirmation of Avis's need of a champion against an envious and false world. A few hours, perhaps less, and he would have the right to hunt the lion, or spear the windmill, or sue the libellous for her sake, and his heart was glad at the prospect. Chiefly, however, his mind was in possession of one image, which had occupied it since its first impression—her face in its moment of softening, its extraordinary sweetness, and its ivory set in gold, with eyes that drew his soul from his own keeping—at this particular mental stage the image was entirely sufficient.

The sun was hot, the day superb, with light southerly airs, cool, which stirred the odour of the wattle-trees, blooming in their fairy way wherever they had leave to stand. Wattle is not necessary

for stock-breeding; its value is æsthetic and romantic—a value which is small in the eyes of him who clears the primeval forest for a living. The lover in his gloriousness, giving tribute to its loveliness, resolved to spare it generously, and to plant it liberally in groves above the house, because its crown was golden like her own; more, he gave a kindly thought to the cockatoos as they screeched at intervals above him, because they also had a yellow crest—such was the youthful extravagance of his mood as he rode to bliss.

Avis awaited his coming in a mood compounded of a score of moods, as stormy as complex. She knew he would come; she was thankful it had not been sooner. Yet she was no nearer readiness to meet him than on the evening after their parting, when she had been driven as devious, as powerless, as a rudderless vessel on a jumbled sea. Had he spoken definitely on the polo-ground, she would have given herself to him without an instant's question; but there had been a week of thought, and she was in a fever of indecision. Sometimes in its progress she had felt as though she could never feel anything again; her nerves lay numb with exhaustion. Then, again, memory, conviction, pride, remorse, resentment, longing, would recommence their furious concert, till she thought her reason would give way. She loved him—that was a fact for facing, if one can be said to face an avalanche, before which flight is the only wisdom; and she hated herself for loving him, for she had never permitted herself an instant's contemplation of the possibility of lov-

ing any man—self-respect, justice, forbade it. That some man should one day love her hopelessly to torment, even to death, that she had imagined in exalted moments, and it had seemed a fair thing; but herself to love like this, this was degradation, this was horrible! She would not do it; there was an end of the matter. But she did, and it was only a beginning; for what was she, the heir of all the ages of pairing and mating, to decide that the long, long thread of life, begun, let us say, no further back than Eden, should come to an end in her? Life laughed at her in her brain, in her veins, and the argument was never closed. If most men were bad, this man was good—if one had cursed, another might come to bless, and one could not gallop for ever through the Bush, and when one had learned to spin and to play the violin, and to shoot at a mark and to grow roses, occasionally there came a vision of years when new accomplishments might pall, and friends might cease for fewness, and the colour should fade and desire fail—yet what right had she to take him? The question was intolerable in its bitterness, and its lash to her pride—pride of a woman young, well-endowed in birth and brain and person, and apt for all the joy of being, who knew herself “not as other girls.” If he understood, would he not turn from her, though it might be with a broken heart? Or, understanding, if he claimed her still, in the rush of passion, and reproached her later! Death would be easier. Yet she would have drunk her cup of happiness; she could die when the reproach came. Here appeared

the tempter, whispering that, husband or lover, Hazell need never know—who was there to tell him? It was an old story, and vague at its clearest, the right of it in the unwavering keeping of one only, her very nearest. Hazell had forsworn the world—who should tell him? Silence would do him no wrong. No other man had ever had her love, so that for him the unwasted, cumulative volume was deep enough and sweet enough to enrich, to satisfy, to atone, though he were as hungry as the sea for the river. She asked nothing concerning his own past. He wore a wedding-ring, but he had said with violence that he had no wife; they were therefore free, and whatever lay behind to his account, she wrote it off boldly, and his history for her began with their meeting. Society would declare —— But society was a rotten fabric, built of shams, elaborately buttressed up with humbug, existing only for its dear existence's sake—what honest soul believed in it? Society! Heavens! how tiny is its kingdom, and how artificial its apparatus, when one faces the great world of seed-time and harvest, of sun and stars, of the earthquakes that break the mountains, of the millions of swarming things that have their being in a summer! Yet to us, born in and of it, human society is more real than the earthquake.

Avis Fletcher could no more pass its moral limits than, while she lived among her own kind, she could get beyond its recognition. She felt it impossible that she should go to the man she loved under what her own society would consider false

pretences. There must be no shadow between them; yet what if the substance must be relinquished with the shadow? If he shrank from her? He would not shrink. He was welling toward her on the crest of the wave; he had shouldered up and stood beside her against the world—tiny enough, but the world for all that. But if she were not worthy of him? Had she any right to give him anything short of the best a woman might be? Was he not deserving of the choicest? and, much as she had to gain, would she not give most truly by denying herself to him, him to herself? But the denial would kill her. Oh, that such a dilemma was hers! How had she sinned in the sight of Heaven that it had decreed to her so intolerable a fate?

The days passed, the nights in alternate anguish and torpor, with odd, brief periods of unresisted sweetness when she drifted in the memory of his eyes, his smile, his worshipping, protecting presence. Visions of Death, always in tempting contrast to the young, the strong, the keenly living, visited her, and places of flight, of new beginnings in another country, thoughts of home and her mother's tenderness; yet all the time, like some water-plant, whose head upon the surface waves and tones with a thousand airs, the heart, the foundations of her nature, were fixed and rooted far down immovably in the being of the man she loved, about whom, among a million doubts, she had no doubt at all.

CHAPTER XI

ON the eighth morning, when Hazell's expectancy kept him in perpetual motion, nature, rebellious at prolonged excitement, consigned Avis to prolonged and dreamless sleep. The machinery of the body is arranged for work, and if it be good sound machinery it will at least make an effort to do its work well, in spite of a distracted soul. Mrs. Bolitho, creeping in with muffled stick to inspect the sleeper at about the hour of Hazell's early lunch, was met by a beautiful, bright brown glance of surprise and apology, and saw with joy that the haggard face was haggard no more, the blue lines erased, the roundness restored. Avis arose full of the content of health, pleased to be alive and to play about in the bath, and because the sun was shining, and because the climbing Maréchal Niel along the verandah was a wonder of leaves and flowers, and because the air was warm with the odour of blooming stocks. Yesterday's struggle was dim with the distance of ages—unreal; her attention refused it; the real things were about her in spring luxuriance. To breakfast on bananas and cream, and wander in the orchard, and make a raid on the kitchen, and claim to make the butter; to visit the stables, with a store of apples and sugar and a following of children; to swing the children and herself under the orchard trees till all were weary with laughter and move-

ment—these were the real things. Dull care was gone; nay, was it ever there? Avis had sought her bed a wreck, and risen from it a romp, rich in the power of sleep.

Fortunately the poise of the Wamagatta household was not so rigid that a romp should upset it. The haleness of its master, who had yet to learn the meaning of the word nerves, the light-heartedness of its mistress, who thought cheerfulness the first of Christian virtues, were more resentful of illness and a sad countenance than of over-hilarity and roguish pranks. When Avis had hidden his newspaper, crowned his hoary head with fresh vine-leaves, given over the library and its contents to the rigs of an armful of puppies, and betaken herself beyond reach of vengeance, the old man inquired of his wife what the men of New South Wales were thinking of that so much mettle went unyoked.

“’Pon my word, my dear, though I always preferred a little woman, I think if I had met missy here before I met you—I think—Gad, I do!—she would have run me to earth.”

“The one unforgiveable quality in a woman, so far as I know you, my dear, is that she should have nothing to say for herself,” replied his wife. “Now, little women, in a general way, have the most to say, though one would hardly think their tongues would be comparatively so much smaller that they should move comparatively so much faster.”

There are brains of moderate nimbleness which make exhausting efforts to follow flights quicker than their own; there are others of slower pace

which rest unmoved by any temptation. Mr. Bolitho had never in his life attempted to understand the gyrations of his wife's wit; he admired from a distance, himself in unconnected darkness, as might be a spectacle of fireworks.

Caradon, the manager-son, put in an appearance at lunch-time, ready with his weekly account of stewardship. Of his wife, who was with him, her mother-in-law said always that she was the plainest good-looking girl of her acquaintance. She was languid with a superabundance of slender inches, her eyes and features unremarkable, her colouring curiously dead, her voice slow and soft. She was cool, she was graceful, she was an artist in the matter of her own clothing. Good money from good silver mines had given her every advantage of education and travel. By arrangement with her husband before marriage, they visited Sydney twice a year, and treated themselves invariably to the Cup week in Melbourne. With such assistance, she endured without complaint the monotony of Wamagatta. The weekly visit to headquarters in this instance was lively with a detail of welcome news.

"We have got Naboth's vineyard at last, sir," said Caradon loudly to his father.

"Eh, what?—Naboth's vineyard? 'Pon my honour, my dear!" returned the old gentleman briskly.

"Spencer," cried his wife, "we may die contented. But when, Caradon—how did you manage it?"

"Old Puddick is dead at last, mother—that's how it is; and Crawley, knowing, of course, that we had

been coveting the land for years, offered it to Ahab (you observe I don't say to Jezebel, ma'am) before putting it into the market."

"Bravo!" cried Avis.

"If I were called Jezebel by my eldest son," said the mistress of the house, "he or I should die—probably he; but you may thank me, all of you, and I hope you know it. How much civility do you suppose you would have met with from a grasping old cantanker like that if I had not given him cuttings of all my best roses!"

"Bow—bow—bow to the mother-in-law elect!" sang Josephine, the daughter-in-law, with mild irreverence, and bobbed her husband's head as she did so.

"Reverence your lord, Pheenie," the young man demanded, continuing: "Of course, mother dear, we all recognise you as the goddess, not the machinery, at Wamagatta; but, notwithstanding the cuttings, I guess it occurred to our friend Publican Crawley that he would get a better price from Ahab than out of the world that bids at markets."

"There wasn't an improvement in the whole 640 acres," said Avis, "unless you call a slab hut in tatters, a score of shallow old gold shafts, and a plot of old unpruned run-to-flower-and-wood peach-trees 'improvements.'"

"Crawley called them so," said Caradon dryly. "He didn't seem to think that land values had depreciated lately, nor that a square mile on the top of a ridge, approached by a bridle-track mostly per-

pendicular, was otherwise than a desirable residential spot."

"I doubt Crawley's been too sharp for you, my boy," remarked his father.

"Well, sir, I don't say that; but I knew that if I let pass this long-wished-for opportunity of getting in the vineyard and squaring off the run to the top of the ridge, I need never approach Mrs. Bolitho any more. I remembered that the property was not entailed; that I was rather old to learn another trade, and that Pheenie's silver was not what it used to be. Cold rice, Avis, please, and a bit of the angelica in it."

"What's the figure, my boy?" said Mr. Bolitho.

"No business at the lunch-table, Spencer. I don't allow it," interrupted his wife, seeing that her son was minded to cherish his secret and play the tease. "Digestion before everything. Naboth's vineyard is ours. Yes, Pheenie, I will trouble you for the cream; my heart is *that* light that nothing will lie heavy on it."

"The gentility of Auntie Bolitho!" said Avis. "Heart, indeed!"

"Put no money on the lightness of any portion of my maternal inside till she has heard the figure," said Caradon, longing to refuse it.

"So lucky there is no entail," said Mrs. Bolitho, in a meditative way; "we can afford to make an effort now and then." Her son shook his fist at her. "Spencer, we must begin clearing at once, before the weather gets too bad; I should like to see a dozen men there."

"Three went up to-day with a horse and chain," said her son calmly.

"Spencer, it appears we keep loafers about the place waiting for the gum-trees to grow up——"

"Caradon is armed at every point. Such mushroom pride must die," said Avis. "Caradon, I'll race you on Hajji up to the heights of Naboth's vineyard this afternoon, for a couple of pairs of driving gloves."

"Done! Hajji! Hajji fresh against my poor Digger is hardly fair, but I'll take you for the honour of my sex," replied Caradon. "What days are these when woman enters the field against man!"

"Always been the same, but when Atalanta stoops to pick up the wedding-ring, man wins in a canter!" It was one of Mr. Bolitho's oldest and best jokes, and he brought it out in his bluffest and best manner.

Every one smiled. The reception of the invariable joke is the finest test of the place of age in affection.

"It's a stoop for Atalanta," said Avis. "As the only unmarried person present, I say it boldly. No one please amend that she stoops to conquer."

"As the only unmarried person present, you are the only one who can't give an opinion on the wedding action," said Josephine, softly drawling.

"Hath not a spinster eyes? Do you suppose I haven't watched her?" returned Avis. "The female head at the altar hangs abased."

"Silly convention; no meaning in it," said Mrs.

Bolitho. "The wedding-ring is applied to the nose, by which every poor married woman is led. I speak from experience, and I dare you, Spencer, to contradict me."

"Eh, what, my dear? Talk so fast, all of you ——"

"Spare my father's conscience, mother, please. I remember the pair of you all my life, and the way of you. Ever seen a big blind beggar being borne along home by a small, broad, vigorous dog? Seen the beggar trot, nearly pulled over by the dog? Dog forging ahead for all he's worth. There, ladies, you have seen the matrimonial progress of my parents."

"My stick, Pheenie, I beg; it has fallen by your chair. I have lunched," said Mrs. Bolitho, and rose from the table with dignity.

They went out to the verandah. Caradon resumed the almost incessant pipe, his father the almost incessant nap.

"If I were asked to define man," said Avis, "I should say that he is a creature which takes its leisure in narcosis."

"It's a survival of chivalry," said Mrs. Bolitho—"a voluntary handicap in the race with women's wit."

"Rather, it's assumed to deaden the pangs of conscious inferiority," said Avis.

"Avis," remarked Josephine deliberately, "you really *will* be an old maid. No man will marry a girl who knows his inferiority."

"He naturally prefers one who has to learn it," she answered, laughing.

Caradon hung on to his amber tube with a condescending smile, hiding, as often before, some fear of the golden damsel who had such winged words for the young not of her own sex.

"I think, Avis," said Josephine in her penetrating, unhurried tones, "that you honestly dislike all men under seventy."

"The mass of men under seventy shall combine to make that impossible," said a strong, mellow voice quickly, coming from the house behind them, and Hazell appeared, masterful, smiling, gladness in every line of him. He looked at Avis, and drew a deep breath, as though to inhale the perfume of the air, and then moved round briskly, greeting all but her. He could not bring himself to offer his hand, when his arms were straining to embrace her before all the world, nor, now that he saw her again and their eyes had met, was there need for the moment of any gesture. She stood without the smallest stir. Her heart seemed still within her, as though with its wild leap at the sound of his voice it had gone to his keeping, leaving her inert. Yet she also smiled, as though at the ordinary pleasant words that passed about her ears, an unconscious smile of softening, with the eyelids drooping over unseeing brownness, and the features which her friends would know as keen or proud or eager, tender with unreasoned content.

Mrs. Bolitho, attentive to them both, made a mental bow of relinquishment and subsided into her satisfaction. The mountain had come to Mahomet; the man to Avis. "And may I be whipped,"

thought the vivacious lady, "if ever I saw a pair more seriously in love!"

There was some talk of stock—inevitable in a sheep-breeding community—and Hazell acquitted himself well, sufficiently interested in the prospects of shearing and the proposed planting of salt-bush as a cheap and drought-proof fodder. The master of the house awoke, and recognising his guest chiefly as a man who knew Cornwall, entered upon a description of a steeplechase of his youth, to which Hazell was sympathetic.

"What about our race?" inquired Caradon, as time passed; and it was agreed that the four younger people should hie to Naboth's vineyard when fortified by the afternoon cup of tea.

Mrs. Bolitho entered upon Avis changing her clothes for riding, and put her arms about her fondly.

"Don't break your neck, dear child!" she cried. "Don't break your neck. Enjoy your ride, and come back safe to your old Australian mother. Kiss me, darling!"

The two embraced with an enthusiasm which they made no pretence of explaining. There were tears in Mrs. Bolitho's eyes as she watched the party off; she felt as though her girl were at the altar.

Hazell's patience was tested by the race. Two only were in the lists, and he had not come to talk conventionalities to indifferent persons, and he found himself full of anxiety lest some dire thing should befall Diana in her wild career. The Arab was superb, as wise as a human being, that he could

see; but if he and his rider should yield themselves to the fever of the chase? The miles were rough, uphill and downhill, with gates to open and creeks to cross, and, he heard, a monstrous rocky height by way of finish; and it was all very well for men to risk their skulls in polo and such-like, but a lady—this lady—it was insane. He chafed inwardly. He dismounted at the starting-point, insisting on an examination of girths; and though he knew she would await him at the end, he saw the two off together with fear and envy.

"We meet at Puddick's rail," said Avis in farewell.

"She'll win," Josephine declared as they followed, cantering leisurely. "Hajji is perfectly fresh, and Digger couldn't touch him anyhow. I never race—too like hard work."

"You don't like hard work? How far is Puddick's rail?"

"Three miles or so—scarcely more. You have to make its acquaintance, of course. It has rather a gruesome story attached to it, which, I suppose, will cling to it forever."

"Tell me, please," Hazell returned, glad of a topic to hand.

"Well, Puddick was an old fellow who had a life-lease of these particular 640 acres which Mr. Bolitho has so much coveted. It belonged to Crawley, the publican, Swan with Two Necks, in Beulah. I dare say you know it. As a matter of fact—it's rather an open secret hereabouts, as these sort of things are—he had done a bit of 'dummy-

ing' for Crawley in the early days of the Robertson Act. You may have heard of it."

Hazell had heard.

"Did Crawley, then, own land as well as a tavern?"

"Crawley began as a squatter, I believe he began as a kind of gentleman, but many things contrived to ruin him, principally, I dare say, the sort of taste that makes a public-house attractive. Any way, he sold any rood he had ever possessed except this, that he had promised to Puddick for his life; and Puddick somehow wouldn't die, and we used to think my father-in-law would go first, without seeing his heart's desire—Wamagatta square up to the Northern Road——"

"Watched pots," suggested Hazell.

"Yes; and the wretched creature had some horrible complaint, for which, they say, he would have no advice, which caused him constant pain, and it appears he could get relief only by hanging over something, with his waist—what in me would be waist—pressed against something. And there he would stay day after day, head and arms hanging down on one side, legs on the other, with the sun beating on him. I've often seen him—dreadful grotesque kind of figure!"

"By Jove! if that rail could speak!" said Hazell.

"Did he live alone?"

"Quite alone. Had a cow and some fowls, and a horse and cart, and no other visible means of support. So many people in the Bush are like that—human orchids, Mrs. Bolitho says—live on air and sunlight, and very little else that one can see."

"I value the suggestion," said Hazell. "I can work out a chain of enlightenment. Orchid: lily of the field; Solomon's lilies, which toil not, neither spin—small selector. I have often wondered lately whether it was not my duty as a magistrate to arrest on a charge of vagrancy stationary personages with no visible means of subsistence."

"I am sure it's not your duty. You are not in your crowded Old World. People have a right here not to subsist, if they don't want to. It would be more for the public welfare if you had the rail destroyed. Puddick's ghost will haunt it."

"When I have seen it—not before, please. My experience does not contain a ghost. I will certainly order a bonfire."

"There will certainly be a ghost. I can imagine it. Some close cloudy night, when the morepork is rasping one's nerves to madness, old Puddick will be seen hanging over the broken fence, stiff, black fingers spread out pointing downwards, not a movement about him—dead to the world. I have seen the poor wretch so heaps of times. Ugh! I can see him now! Suppose we gallop."

They found the gates open that lay in their way, the racers having relied on their following. Hazell was relieved that Avis had not thought fit to jump the fences. The ridge of hills lay dark and high between them and the sunset, and they mounted slowly, the horses, surefooted and practised, climbing laboriously, with many a slip, and much hollow and ringing sound of stumbling hoofs up the rocks, the riders gripping closely, and swerving sometimes

almost to the saddle to avoid over-reaching and outstanding boughs.

"Rather rash, racing," said Hazell the wooer anxiously.

"That's the fun of it," said Josephine the wan carelessly.

As they went, the lover resolved that, if merciful Heaven had preserved his lady through such peril, an opportunity of private speech should be his, though he had to lead her openly by the bridle to a decent distance. It was an added difficulty that the other two were married, and as such could not politely be left together; but there are moments when politeness fails. Hazell's eager heart urged his tired grey against the studied restraint of his hand, and once or twice he was fain to stop and await his leisurely companion, whose fancy, matrimonially fixed, roamed only at leisure. No mangled corpse lay in their way. They gained a small green clearing, somewhat small in surrounding hillocks, where a small slab hut of the most neglected sort lay among traces of what had once been a garden. The bark roof hung in unbroken strips, a grove of fruit-trees, years untended, was thick in leaf; clumps of white irises bloomed freely. A little way before the open door a remnant of fencing supplied the rail palliative for Puddick's anguish. A waste of ring-barked gum-trees stood around, and occasional columns of smoke of varying volume, rising with flame that showed itself in quivering waves against the sinking sun, declared the work of Caradon's men among the timber.

"The ghost has taken them," Hazell exclaimed, seeing no human thing.

"It has left Hajji, though," said Josephine, pointing to the left. "Miss Fletcher won't be far. Oh, there's my husband on the other side; they are stoking stumps—fascinating work, so dirty!" She turned to the right.

"Are we to stoke stumps too?"

"Of course. It's a joy that never palls, and, unlike most joys, it's productive of good. I haven't burnt off for an age."

"Full moon to-night; we can make it an opportunity to wait for her coming," said Hazell artfully, imagining a long forest solitude with Avis.

"Yes; we can go back round by the road," she answered.

He paused a moment. She strayed toward her husband.

He seized the chance and made for the point where a dark figure was busy among mounting smoke. At last, there would be a quarter of a mile between them and the world. At last!

Avis, her habit caught up, stood feeding with smaller wood a great smouldering stump, from which the large trunk, dead long ago, had burnt and fallen away, and lay, also smouldering at the break, in the smash of its branches. He halted Glaucus by Hajji, and advanced to her on feet that felt no touch of earth.

"Who won?" he asked her, in a voice that thrilled.

"Hajji, of course," she answered, without any

sign of surprise, as though she had expected him. "Please help me, Mr. Hazell. This kind of iron-hard stump will take a dozen lightings and eat up half an acre of sticks—a most obstinate kind. I want to bank it up with really solid logs, and keep the fire in till it gets right under. Then it's pretty safe. Do you mind hauling about heavy logs?"

"I don't mind anything," he answered, but he wished her to look at him. Hers was a splendid figure, pliantly stooping. The thick wave of her hair, dropped sweeping over the rim of a crisply curled ear, was beautiful to see, but he wanted the fulness of her eyes, that he might hold them while he told her what he had come to tell. Temporarily, he followed her directing finger, and grappled with a mighty limb of the fallen tree, lugging it bravely into desired position well up to the stump.

"Short of a deluge of rain, that is safe," said Avis. "Another one of the same kind, if your charity goes so far, for this great gum here. The men don't know as much about burning off as I do—newly imported Irish loafers, I dare say; they have gone down to the station for supplies of some sort, I believe. Fancy knocking off work for the night with half your fires bound to go out in the course of it! Paid labour, of course——"

"Labour must be paid," said Hazell, rushing in to interrupt the baffling flow of her words. "What else is it for? All men want payment of some sort. Do you remember the first evening—about sunset, with the moon due much as it is now—when you came into my bachelor loneliness and drank my

tea? I asked payment then. Now you set me to cart about logs for you—much harder work. I want higher payment!" His voice startled her; she looked at him an instant. The glance swept him headlong into declaration: "Then a sight of your golden head was more than enough; now—oh, now, I am asking for your golden self! Avis! Avis! yourself, Avis!"

There was nothing in the world for Avis but his voice and its deep vibrant call, and his palm outstretched impulsively. Quicker than thought was her action; without a word she gave her hand into his, and he clasped it as though his life lay in it, and shouted "Ha!" Then, drawing closer, urged:

"For ever and ever, Avis! Look at me and say so."

She paused a moment, then turned her face to his, pride in the freedom of the gesture, and told him, clear and sweet:

"For ever and ever, Ralph!"

Her head upon his shoulder was lighter than a dream kiss; the clasp of her fingers round his was as tremulous and close as a child's might be. She yielded to the strain of his embrace most exquisitely gentle—the unique, warm, snowflake gentleness of a woman who loves and surrenders. He lost consciousness and drifted into the unreasoning flood of triumphant being.

"But the others!" she cried, recollecting, disengaging herself.

"They've done it themselves," he answered, keeping her hand tight.

"Not in my sight!"

He looked round. "They're entirely absorbed with their fires, and the light is failing."

"All the more reason to work; we can't stay here indefinitely."

"But we can stay with each other?" he answered, coaxing, boyishly; "that's for ever and ever. Avis, you've the most charming name in the world—Avis!"

"Have I, Ralph?"

"Except mine, when you say it."

"I want to save that other stump. Draw up another log for me."

"Hang the logs! I've so much to say to you."

"No—please—there's ever and ever to say it in."

He laughed joyously, dropped her hand with an air of blind obedience, and went away a few yards to attack a fallen trunk that was quite beyond one man's power to move.

"How ridiculous you are! Let me help you!" she cried, and placed herself at the opposite end.

Between them, straining every nerve, the timber rolled a foot forward.

"I won't allow you to work like a galley-slave," he objected. "I've loved you from the first moment I saw you, Avis."

"For goodness' sake, Ralph, have you no lower tones in your voice?"

"Yes, but I want to shout. I want all the world to know that you are mine."

"I could not live with Stentor."

"When all the world knows it, I will spend the rest of my time whispering it to you."

"What a wasted life!" Avis laughed, but the derision quavered. "If we could find a couple of strong sticks, we might lever this thing along; you don't realise how quickly night falls in this country."

"There are all the fires, and there will be a moon, Avis."

"And it's a snaky time of year, and the old wood is the chosen place of any amount of dangerous reptiles just getting warmed up. No, no, Ralph. Well, then, just one. Honour bright—one! Do you call that 'one'? Now, be sensible, or I shall call for the others to help."

The threat subdued him, and he consented to go away far enough to cut a pair of sapling gums for leverage. A faint shriek from Josephine inquired if they were ready to descend. Avis, laying violent hands upon herself, went across the clearing, and submitted the ardour of her partner as a forest-clearer, while the air was full of the laughter of jackasses, and the redness of the sunset died away.

"They have done far more than we have," she told Hazell, coming back reproachful, "and I am not at all sure what they think——"

"Let 'em think. When this brute is alongside that stump, they can hang diminished heads. But you are never going to do such navvy's work again, Avis! Did you hear the jackasses? I used to dislike them. Use makes them quaint and jolly. Here's your rod. Now, then—are—you—ready? Ahoy! ahoy!"

The trunk was in place. Hazell addressed his

damp forehead with his handkerchief; his companion, sitting on the conquered stock, panted and fanned herself with her hat. Darkness had fallen and the evening chill. All around them played the fires—some small and low, as of a camp, as if to boil the pot; others, as they might be beacons, flaring high with deep-piled boughs, roared about great standing trees with cracks and snaps, and a continual under-sound of crepitation. The light shone on the golden head of Avis.

“Avis Paradisea!” said Hazell. “Gold was the colour of the gods—wasn’t it? I have been rack-ing my brains lately for my small classical recollection. I have the gold fever, so appropriate to this country. Haven’t they a term of endearment among the Greeks—‘chryson’?”

“You foolish fellow! have you been thinking about my hair ever since that first night?”

Her voice, surcharged with tenderness, failed a little under its burden, and shook between tears and laughter. She longed to be alone, free from adoring eyes for half an hour, that she might realise her happiness, adjust her mental balance, decide her future method and manners. No thought more serious crossed her mind, no doubt in moral or social ethics; she felt her heart bounding away with her reason—that was all. She named him a foolish fellow, and her tone refused to convey deprecation of his folly.

“That first night!” he repeated. “Yes, that first night.”

The sense of it returned to him—the rattle of the

jackasses, the apparition of the horsewoman, the trifling hospitality and its return, the setting off of Diana through the moonlit Bush. At the end of the train came a memory of the tramp who had watched her, and Proudfoot's message concerning him flashed into his mind. He turned to her suddenly, and asked :

"Do you happen to remember anything in your childhood in your country of a farm-labourer called Luke Rennard ?"

The question struck her like a blow, and changed the excitement of her mood from joy to fury ; wave met wave, and the meeting was the convulsion of the eager. All the hundred-head anguish of the past week, all the suffering of her girlhood, all her rage and grudge against man as man rushed back upon her, and she sprang to her feet to avenge the insult—to cast it off : to cast him off.

"Go !" she said—"go !"

It was all she could say. Her eyes blazed in her white face ; her outstretched arm flung him away to the uttermost.

Hazell started forward.

"What have I done ? Why," he asked, bewildered, "Avis ?"

"Dare to call me Avis ! Nevermore Avis to you ; I defy your insult. Did you think because I had kissed, I was so easy to kiss ? Ah, I could kill you !"

"I have done nothing ; I meant nothing—I swear it before God !" He watched her features varying in the agony of struggling passions. He strode

to her, and tried to take her hand. "Avis!" he pleaded.

She shrank away from him.

"Why, I love you!" he said.

She found words:

"You love me! Go!"

"I will not go. Why should I? What is this Rennard to you? Tell me; I insist."

"You insist on my telling you—now—now—already? Is it to humiliate me? But I will be humiliated no further than by my one act I am. Oh, I never dreamed, not when I hated man most, a man could be so shameless. You came—you came to kiss, and I kissed you"—she could not speak for a second—"and you cannot wait a day to insult—to *insist*. I would have told you—in time. Is there so much hurry? Oh, the immeasurable meanness of you! Now you shall never know anything from me, for I hate you."

Her sentences came abrupt, poignant, concentrated.

"Why—damnation! Are my ears playing me false? Just now you kissed me!"

She faced him superbly.

"I did. I have acknowledged it already—I kissed you; and I could brand you with one of these burning sticks—brand you as a coward—because I did so!"

Hazell flung up his arms, a gesture of desperation. The riddle was beyond him, but there was no mistaking the hatred of her face, which seemed in its whiteness, as the fires played their intermit-

tent light on it, to stab him out of the darkness. The crackling of the consuming wood filled up the pause after her words, and a rising wind blowing to them across the clearing brought the sound of whistling. Caradon Bolitho beguiled his toil by the touching cadences of "Home, Sweet Home." The strain mocked Hazell. His mental palace of contentment was falling in ruins under this inexplicable onslaught; ungovernable resentment rose in him.

"It seems to me," he said, "that women are subject to demoniac possession."

"They are!" she cried, with an upward jerk of her head, and a flash that promised vengeance—"they are! and under it they give their reason and their hearts to men, who break and bruise, abuse and affront!"

"I never yet abused nor affronted any woman," said Hazell savagely; "but I may do it still—I may do it here and now."

There was a slow grinding sound among the trees. She looked up quickly, then with both hands pushed him from her violently, and leaped back herself, just as the long, ashen, barren shaft, unbranched and straight, fell heavily between them, and its broken base, twenty feet away, sparked merrily and flickered. She put her hands before her eyes an instant, as though to shut out a dreadful thought made visible. Hazell's broad chest heaved. He stood with feet apart and folded arms, scowling above his fierce light gaze.

"Why didn't you let me die?" he snarled.

She almost screamed.

"No, no! Not a second time—the visitation of Heaven—though you were—as you are—a greater one than he! But go!"

With a hissing noise and a shower of ruddy sparks, flame and smoke burst forth from the high open mouth of a hollow tree not far behind, the effect that of a grotesque chimney on fire; small tongues licked the bare, jagged arms and the main trunk, wherever any softer remnant of bark gave food for them. A glittering rain of tiny particles fell about Avis, blown toward her. Loose hair blew about her temples, and the tendrils of it flickered; she seemed ever to attract light, and in love or hate to give it forth. He looked at her, fascinated by the proud beauty of her, repelled by her inexplicable insolence and cruelty, dismayed beyond endurance, balked, smarting, wounded, and he felt a ring of forbidding spread from her to him, as though the very air stiffened to cast him off.

"Thank God, I know this first!" he cried bitterly, and moved away a step.

"If God had cared for me, I should never have known you at all!" she answered; then, her voice echoing with wild, training reproach: "Oh, God! what have I done that I should yield and suffer again?"

Hazell paused at the pain of the words, and stepped toward her. As he did so she felt his purpose, and turned upon him pitilessly.

"Will you never go? Will nothing rid me of you? I tell you, if you realised how I loathe the

sight of you, you would rather sink into the earth than stand where I can see you !”

Conviction stung him, blood rushed hotly to his cheeks and brow, he clenched his fists, he gnashed his teeth at her, and strode away, stamping upon the ground. She heard his horse retreat ; she sank down, crouching lower and lower involuntarily, she knew not why, for blankness had come upon her mind and insensibility upon her body.

CHAPTER XII

IN a world subject to the form of time, the human heart, with its inveterate need of something that abides, conceives and establishes certain institutions, which have an unquestioned rightness, an essential prerogative. They take precedence of all ordinary concerns. When they are mentioned there is silence, as before a dealing of Providence, or admiring acquiescence. These institutions vary with race, with circumstance, but they exist in every community, in every heart. Such are the spring cleaning of middle-class, the baby of all-class households, the tobacco-cult of all mild men, not otherwise indispensable, the preserving and proper destruction of foxes, the game of whist, the Australian shearing. We could not do without them. In monotonous lives they are the supreme event; among perplexing mental changes, the fall of governments, the growing assumptions of women, their inflexibility affords a consoling restfulness; even the greater sorrows of the soul, loss, anxiety, become secondary before the dignity of these; for there may be a vacant chair at the family table, nevertheless, all chairs must be purified from the slow stain of winter; there may be a threat of suspended banks, foreclosing mortgages, nevertheless, sheep must be shorn.

Hazell found comfort in this last, which may not

impertinently be named the Australian feast of obligation. In the brutality of mental shock, in the tearing and rending distraction of his mind, in the violence of conflicting passion, he would have been shaken to pieces, broken up, but for the imperious call to shear his sheep. That he was new, not only to the function, but to the sublime importance of it, that he was alone in his obedience, discounted its healing value, for full appreciation of a faith comes but by birth in it—what Frenchman could feel fit reverence for the criterion of the Marylebone Cricket Club? A mere bachelor, who can assure no discomfort other than his own, is deprived of the moral support that comes of a household disarranged, domestic appointments swept aside for some great yearly due. But the feeling of it was in the air. Always latent, the full force of it had spread invincibly downward from far northern parts, where sheep are shorn in earlier months—in June, in May—to his own district, where their fleecing was a custom of the spring. It reached him through his self-absorption; one word was hissed by every tongue, one word—stock—*shear*—with varying modification. Shears, shearing, shearers, shearing-shed, shearers' hut, shearers' cook, and so forth, appeared in every sentence; the sentence came into being for its sake. Shearing-time is the apotheosis of the sibilant in English speech; philologists will guess how the island continent sizzles. Social life was suspended. The males of each station ate silent breakfasts in the dimness of the dawn, and went forth, solemnly preoccupied, in religious haste, to spend days of in-

definite length on the shearing-floor. They went, it seemed, for years, or for ever. No bride might ask of her husband's return; if not in anger, then in sorrow, he would have answered with the question, How could he tell it—at shearing-time? The women, uneasy, superfluous, their habits disregarded, abode beleaguered at home, no means of leaving it, save on foot under miles of blazing sun; there was none for them; every hand on the run which might otherwise have brought in a horse or harnessed him was engaged in some connection of shearing. The townships lay deserted, newspapers unread, church congregations wore their best in the true sanctuaries, wooden sheds throughout the Bush, where lines of lean, hard-mouthed men, bent double week after week, performed the annual sacrifice, and the odour of sheep rose steadily to heaven.

Uninitiate though he was, Hazell's interest grew as he watched his fleeces fall. His impulse to leave the country was stayed, at all events, till after the shearing. Not likely he would find an instant purchaser for Burrabindar, and how could flocks be left in wool? He remained spending days half-nauseated in the seething shanty watching the endless procession of terrified merinos driven in brown and bulky, driven out white and poor, and he asked himself from time to time if it were worth so much toil, so much agitation, that one solitary man, who cared not whether he lived or died, should draw interest on his capital? As the month went on, he felt that he had been standing on a greasy floor for ever, watching struggling quadrupeds, that all the

globe of earth beyond the floor was subdivided into pens of swarming plaintive creatures, protesting at exploitation. They baa'd at him in his nights; sleepless or restless in his dreams, he wrought with endless enumeration of seething herds, and in the intervals of counting sheep he cursed women—evil enigmas, Dead Sea apples, which lured the senses and became ashes in possession; and he cursed men, fools of men who could do neither without them nor with them. He nailed his attention to the sheep, passing—a frightened, bleating multitude—passing. To attempt the riddle of Avis was to lose reason; to touch on his present desolation was to touch a wound too exquisitely sore to bear it. Fair quality of wool it was, they told him, not very long and rather dry, but, considering the season, better than might have been expected. Dry, was it? he commented, for the reek of yolk was in his nostrils, everything stunk of it, it tainted the food set before him. He ate hardly anything; his clothes began to hang loosely on him. Yet his case was better than that of Avis, upon whom shearing made no demands. The days were long past when the head station at Wamagatta was perturbed for the yearly ceremonial. Caradon might torment his wife with irregular doings; overseers under Caradon might drudge in the cause of the required 100,000 fleeces, but it was enough for the owner of them to ride slowly on his old horse twice a week to the shed, and even then to note things chiefly with an eye to a comparative past. At any time, moreover, though she claimed the full name of Australian for her sym-

pathies, Avis had never taken the point of view of the true sheep-breeder ; she would doubt if God had made so many sun-drenched miles with a view to the British colonist ; she would extend a warm pity to the free, leaping kangaroo and wallaby, the poor comical 'possum and padamelon, all exterminated with so high a hand. She would wonder whimsically if the sum total of happiness of a few thousand grumbling human beings and a few million striped sheep balanced that of uncounted marsupials, rodents and birds slain in their interest. But she had more sense than to press her fancy ; she was aware of a person whose income was derived elsewhere, by no effort of her own, by means, probably, no more altruistic. But to hold one's self aloof from the spirit of the feast was verily to fall on silence ; Avis fell there. Nothing hindered, morning after morning she sat silent in her room, her violin in its case, her horses in the stables ; in the afternoon she would generally sleep heavily ; in the evening a book cloaked the emptiness of her thought. She was not conscious of much suffering, yet in after years she looked back, recognising a season of intolerable misery. Her face was thin, her eyes and voice were dull almost to stupor. Mrs. Bolitho watched her anxiously. Something serious had happened, but the girl so near to her was shrouded from her impenetrably, by her silence, as by Athene's mantle. Question seemed impossible. Josephine spoke of having found her on the eventful evening alone and apparently asleep upon a log, when the moon rose. She pleaded fatigue : she had hauled about too many

heavy trees, she said ; she refused dinner, and went to bed.

Hazell was clean gone, mysteriously, not to say uncivilly—gone to his clearing, of course ; but a man so much in love would make some sign, unless he had been dismissed ; one could have sworn that Avis would accept him. Caradon told his wife of a vague rumour of an unpleasant charge against Miss Fletcher, of something which happened long ago in England, and can one say how such things come about ? It may be that the birds of the air carry the matter ; it was generally known in the whole district by people to whom she had never spoken, or even seen, that Hazell would have married her, but for the rumour—rumour which, said some, she had refused to explain, which, said others, she had admitted and he had withdrawn, leaving her to insufferable chagrin.

There was an English mail day when Avis had nothing for the post-bag. Mrs. Bolitho limped to her sitting-room and demanded at least her weekly letter to her mother.

“Is it Saturday, then ?” asked Avis, who was lounging with listless hands along the arm of an easy-chair.

“Yes ; be quick, dear child ; a post-card ! What would your mother think ?”

“I had forgotten ; the days are so like each other.” Avis made no motion toward the writing-table.

“At once, Avis ! The boy is waiting for the bag. You must be ill, dear child !”

"Oh no, not at all; but sometimes lately I have thought I was dead. Really, I think I must be—I am so stupid."

"My dear, you're bilious. I know the feeling. No one has suffered more than I from liver and all the mental appurtenances thereof. But at least tell your mother."

"She wouldn't understand it."

"Then I must tell her myself."

Mrs. Bolitho wrote a hasty line, while Avis stared dully through the window. "Here, you'll like to read what I have written, I dare say."

Avis took it carelessly, and while without interest she followed the words which told of a brief and unimportant but quite absorbing ailment, her friend prepared a private sheet, with the forcible statement:

"Our child is altogether upset by what I take to be a very sore love matter. She is not like herself at all. I must get her away for change; but she is hard to stir, and I, you know, cannot move about as I should like. Avis takes things badly. You know her best; I need not tell you. Could you not hasten your visit here? Indeed, I think she wants you. There are some things for which a good mother is the only help."

When the boy had gone, Mrs. Bolitho returned to find her charge indifferent as before.

"Avis!" she said sharply, "nothing but the death you talk of so foolishly, or some serious incapacity, could account for your conduct, or excuse it. While you have your reason and your right hand,

your letter to your mother should go. I am ashamed for you to have to say such a thing. Think if you had a daughter of your own."

"Too remote to contemplate," was the unresponsive answer.

"Rubbish! Think of her anxiety. Are you human?"

Avis seemed to listen with an effort.

She replied, "I dare say not," and remained staring at the grass outside.

"I have sent for Dr. Middlemass. You must be suffering from incipient softening of the brain."

"Oh, well, he can say so, then."

"And meantime, you are intolerable in the house! I could put up with death, but I cannot stand death's head. I won't have you here; you will go with Caradon and Pheenie to the Melbourne Cup."

"Oh, I think not."

"If they will take you, that is. I won't have you here. I want something cheerful at Wamagatta."

"I can stay in bed if you would rather not see me; or isn't there an empty hut somewhere on the place? You could send me rations, you know, aunty."

"Avis, are you out of your mind?"

"Well, aunty, I rather hope I am."

When the doctor came, he found his advice required for Mrs. Bolitho, not Miss Fletcher. The ways of women are wonderful. Whether a strictly masculine education, a practical manner of life out-of-doors bread-winning, such as may be the custom for them in years to come, will radically change

them, or that their action can be classified and foretold, reckoned with, it is impossible to say. Thus far in our experience it appears to arise out of the exigencies of the moment, treated from an entirely private and original point of view. Its fruit is often magical ; its root is deep in mystery. It was years since Mrs. Bolitho had called medical aid for herself—she was not apt to despond because of a small indisposition, and professional travelling expenses are high. Without good cause, certainly, she would not have summoned a valuable public servant from Beulah. No doubt Mrs. Bolitho was ill—she was in bed, a place she detested except for purposes of sleep ; and the professional countenance, after a visit to the patient, over a cup of tea with the anxious husband, was grave.

“We must keep up her strength, feed her well, but carefully, Miss Fletcher,” said the man of healing. “Most lowering thing, neuralgia.”

“So I believe, doctor, so I believe. Pain on the nerves, I’m told. Now, what I say is, What are nerves ? Never felt a nerve in my life.”

“If all men were like you, what would become of *us* ?” asked the doctor, speaking for his confraternity.

The silence of Avis was much disturbed. She forsook it to wait assiduously upon her old friend, recumbent from neuralgia in the always damaged leg, unsolaced in recumbency, from neuralgia in the generally strong eyes. Twice a day Avis used to read to her for an hour or so, and she would make efforts at conversation, for an invalid may not mope,

as also for the benefit of the bereaved husband, for an old man may not be ignored at his own table. Moreover, as some hand must hold the reins though the team be docile and the road smooth, the ordering of the household fell to Avis. Mrs. Bolitho, fearful lest confinement to the house and sick-room should affect the health of her nurse, ordered Pilgrim to be brought round every morning, and insisted that he was ridden, and further, it was understood that as soon as strength and circumstances allowed, change of air should be tried for the clamorous nerves. Miss Fletcher was not questioned about her softening brain, nor was any physical tonic offered to her; her treatment by Mrs. Bolitho was entirely mental, and objective at that. The girl grew no worse, she mended somewhat. One morning she took suddenly to a romp with Dot and Boyah on the bedroom floor, and it seemed to the neuralgic eyes watching them that years and sorrows fell from her as she laughed. That afternoon the eyes were better, able to cope with print. When the careful nurse argued the point, the patient became fractious and enigmatical. "There are limits," she said decidedly, "beyond which martyrdom will *not* go!" Avis pondered the words, for one would say, speaking generally, that martyrdom *quâ* martyrdom knows no limit, but discussion is the darling of keen minds at rest; the sharpness of the words was soon lost in her dull preoccupation.

Dr. Middlemass declared himself puzzled at the long-continued neuralgia in the limb.

"There may be further bone mischief," he said dubiously.

"They told me, all the people who tormented me for my good, that it would get no worse," said the sufferer.

"That was a considerable time ago, Mrs. Bolitho. They would not be so very far out, even if, which I hope is not the case, there were some new development."

"My dear, you will make no hesitation, I beg—most certainly go down to Sydney and see Dr. Farintosh. Sorry I can't offer to go with you. Missy will go."

It was a consultation in Mrs. Bolitho's room. There was no secret in the matter. Continuous invisible pain on the part of Mrs. Bolitho, continuous inexplicable and non-cure on the part of the Beulah physician, any one might hear all there was to be said on the matter. We all have legs, and so long as they are outwardly whole, we may all talk about them. Missy was of the party.

"Of course," she said, "wherever you like, aunty."

"My child, you hate Sydney, and with all respect for ingenious learning and excellent intention, doctor, I have no opinion of the faculty of healing."

"We have to put up with this sort of thing," said the doctor blandly, addressing the company; "we can only do our best. Dr. Farintosh's best will certainly be better than mine."

"There is nothing better, when anything is wrong with one, than a good bed. Avis hates Syd-

ney, and the northeasters will be in their glory. I won't victimise her for an off-chance."

"If the odds were a thousand to one, we'd take it, aunty. I don't care for any town, but I do care that you should be out of pain."

"Phenie is away; who is to look after you, Spencer? It is out of the question."

"Nonsense, my love; Elspeth will do me. I have great confidence in Elspeth."

"Telegraph to May Comarty to come and stay here," said Avis. "Uncle Bolitho likes her."

"Avis, they are shearing on the Laggan River!"

"All the more reason," said the young woman, "that May should be glad to get away."

"Well, perhaps," the invalid conceded, "if she would send me a telegram every day, saying how you were, Spencer, and you would promise to write me a few lines every day, with your own hand——"

Then it was settled. Mrs. Bolitho was borne elaborately from her bed to the railway, and went off to Sydney in a sleeping carriage. She bore the journey excellently; her only difficulty was at the end, when she had to be lifted up the steps of the hotel.

CHAPTER XIII

It was several years since Avis had been in a city, and Sydney is a large place, with much stir in its streets. Trams rattle and whistle, omnibus-drivers announce their destination in a loud nasal snarl, clocks strike, electric bells ring, newspaper-boys are shrill, and it is a happy haunt for the professional loafer. Beyond the confusion of noise to ears habituated to the silence of the Bush, beyond the effect of comparative suffocation common to all who come from air unlimited to air closely contested, Avis suffered much from the observation of her fellow-creatures. Wherever she went, eyes followed her with a tribute of curiosity, admiration and envy, which would have been dear to many women, but was painful to her. Sixty-eight inches of superb humanity, borne with the goddess step, are an uncommon feast for the gazer of either sex. Feminine heads on all sides wrought according to fashion confessed the desirability of red or yellow as a pigment; but an indescribable something, a shade, a blending of complexion, declared our heroine faultlessly golden, without compliment to a moment's mode, declared her birthright among so much pretension, and Avis, shy, resentful, threatened herself with the adoption of a black wig, and dulled her brilliant features with a close-meshed veil. But

Artemis walks alone in safety—the loafing and the staring can do her no harm.

Dr. Farintosh came and spoke of sciatica: the sudden onset, specially elusive pain, the dark colouring of a sufferer who admitted the consumption of cream with trembling, pointed safely to sciatica. Electric baths were indicated. It is the redeeming quality of an agonising complaint that it is fantastically intermittent. There were days when Mrs. Bolitho was entirely free from it: a victoria, easy of entrance, was hired, and the ladies went about Sydney to divert themselves. No doubt the elder of them was very cheerful, very well amused; no doubt the younger looked with indifference or dislike upon a world that looked so much at her, even though youth and the passion of vigorous life would now and again surge in her veins and call upon her to enjoy. If sometimes it seemed that it could not be a hostile world where so many smiled upon each other, if sometimes she asked herself why it should not be happy wherein was so much sunshine, so many flowers, such a spread of blue waters, the answer seemed to be in an evil fate upon herself. She should have been named Tantara, not Avis. Sydney the beautiful was still lovely round them, not yet spoiled and faded by the over devotion of the sun; the gardens of its villas were still green and glorious with flowers; there was still something of coolness in the nightfall, but it was all unprofitable to her mood. She longed, in violent gusts of longing, for the deep lanes of Southamptonshire, for the pipe of

the blackbird at sunset, for the blossoming trees of spring, for the old grey street of the county town, rich in memories, fair in design, tender with moss and lichen. If one's weird is for all one's life, then would one rather dree it among one's own people, and the cathedral chime that told one's hour of birth may fall soothingly upon sad ears, and the distracted soul shall dwell more easily in an old than in a new garment of circumstance.

The sickly northeast wind blew every afternoon from the Pacific, but Avis made no complaint: she felt the summer southerly from the English Channel. When the city clock struck, her recollection was haunted by a sweet faltering utterance of "Life let us cherish" floating over sacred precincts. Those who worked the harbour ferries wondered that so fair and proud a figure, always alone, always with an air of complete detachment from her surroundings, should make consecutive journeys backward and forward in their craft, journeys of a few minutes taken by most persons with hurried purpose. To Avis they were the most convenient way of pasturing her homesick eyes upon the grand ocean-going liners berthed upon the quays, superb ships, with the mystery of far travel about their massive hulls—hulls which continually cut the waters washing Southamptonshire.

Mrs. Bolitho, for all her watching, missed many details of her companion's actions, but she understood the importance at such a moment of a strong domestic claim. Avis would not leave her ill and lame in a hired chamber, not though all vessels set

seaward every day for happier lands, not though easeful death, ever tempting to the strong and the young, offered relief from pain. "Avis would not leave me," she thought firmly; "and time is everything, and her mother will be here; and, finally, whatever has happened, I cannot believe that that man, in love, will let her go." A fortnight passed. The weather was hot and enervating; society was quiet under it, took its pleasure on its incomparable harbour, talked of flight some whither cooler.

On the afternoon of an important cricket match, whereby the few courted sunstroke for the diversion of the many, the reading-room of the Sutherland Hotel was empty. Avis went in and turned over the journals; she found little to interest her. Having no taste for cricket or for yachting, having no anxiety concerning the money market, and a hearty hatred for politics of all kinds, she knew not what to read. She lighted upon a periodical of flaring exterior, registered under the name of the *Live Un*. Its weekly cartoon was usually clever and offensive; it dealt familiarly with every phase of colonial life from the standpoint of vulgar irreconcilability. What it upheld, what it admired, no man might say, but any man might be sure, week by week, of finding some spiteful word flung where he thought it due. Avis, out of patience with public excitement about cricketers, betook herself to its pages to find some poignant belittlement of the national game. A paragraph in this column called particularly social caught her attention and held it:

"Goodness knows, we are sufficiently accustomed

to male English riffraff in this country—dissolute lordlings and remittance men pepper the land thickly enough—but it has been reserved for the day of the New Woman to introduce to the hupper suckles of Sydney the female ne'er-do-well who has left her country for her country's good. Who, exactly, is the gorgeous person with the aureolined head who has a passion for harbour ferries and is known among her friends as the Bird of Paradise? When matrons of well-established position use their influence to foist such upon our hospitable community, it is time some one made a stand. If we are to continue to respect the Volumnias of the Squattocracy, they must behave according. A fine figure does not excuse everything. Men of doubtful character are bad enough, but woman—— What is society coming to?"

There was no one to see. Avis rent the *Live Un* to pieces, and for a few minutes she trod the soft carpet of the reading-room with the raging step of genuine tragedy. Then she returned to her chair and reasoned with herself, setting down in order arguments for her comfort. It was a small community always agog; and that life must indeed be private which could escape notice. The *Live Un* was notorious even in her own Bush retreat; she had known those who had winced and cursed under its poisonous attack. Had she thought the worse of them? Who would think the worse of her? who would think of her at all next week when there was another victim? The season was dull, yet the scandalmongers of the press must deliver their tale.

For the moment she supplied in her own person the straw for their bricks. Who was the author? It was not likely that the stones of the capital were crying about her of their own accord. She was not a batsman making runs; it was not likely that her story was known by cablegram. She was not an Australian artist making her début at St. James's Hall. A private hand had dealt the blow; a private hand—likely a shabby one in need of a few shillings for a new glove. May Railton could so easily communicate with the social column of the *Live Un*, and, under protest, every clubman in New South Wales read the paper, and his wife heard the news of it somehow. Ralph Hazell was not by this time with his reassuring shoulder. There was a moment for Avis of the anguish of defeat, as though the battle of life were hopelessly ended to her discomfiture; then a new spirit awoke in her, and, well or ill, she defied slander, defied sorrow, defied the world, and she resolved in an instant to fight it with its own weapon, by her own strength.

The "aureolined head" was as high as ever, the fine figure as erect, as she crossed the main hall of the hotel on the way to her room; and it seemed to her that the porter stared at her unduly; and the clerks at the various desks, and the sellers at the stalls, recognised her insolently as the Bird of Paradise of the *Live Un*, but she brushed their glances off as though they had been flies upon her sleeve. The race is to the swift, and the battle to the strong, she told herself, and felt herself both.

Mrs. Bolitho was sleeping, resting after the morn-

ing's electric bath. At the stroke of four Avis came to her sofa with a smile and a cup of tea.

"Come, aunty—nap over! Such a splendid afternoon! Do you know, I was thinking that if you felt equal to it, we might drive out together to the cricket ground and see the end of the match."

It was the first word on Avis's part of a deliberate demand for society, and the demand was sustained. With astonishment, but deep content, Mrs. Bolitho's consent was given as it was asked. With due respect on both sides to the sciatica, it was decided that Miss Fletcher should enter immediately upon acquaintance with Sydney—such of it as remained to endure the usual summer infliction of merciless sun, intolerable winds, paralysing dust-storms. Avis accepted the dulness of the season; it would be lively enough, she said, for a Bush-woman. The place was emptying fast, but there would surely be enough people left to divert an up-country cousin.

The arguments rang genuine. The curious hardness of her face and tone might be accounted as due to effort after mental recovery; drawing-room distraction was probably her own prescription for heartache. They changed their quarters. They were hospitably received by a wealthy widow, Mrs. Wenban, five and forty years ago an adored school-mate of Selina Bulpett, now the owner of a luxurious villa on the sloping shore of Bourke's Bay, with a ravishing view of the blue harbour, whose waters swept her garden wall. Mrs. Bolitho's circle was so select that it could be as extensive as she pleased.

In other days, when she spent part of each year in the capital, she had known every one who figured in the social game of play. Lately, though her rare arrivals were always respectfully chronicled, she had confined her visiting roll to those peculiarly of her own class, old-established pastoralists who possessed town houses. They were people of comparatively quiet life in a gay community, who gave scant attention to the rapid rise and fall of the new wealthy, nor much sought even the important acquaintance of shortlived official rank. Governors come and go, the squadron changes, the Bench of Justice varies, but even in a colony there is something of aristocracy taken root in the soil, secure of its place, bearing responsibility. No house could have been better for Avis's purpose than that known, fantastically, after the fashion of a city of villas, as Gaza, no household more convenient. The Wenbans were above gossip, above the highest swell of its foul sea. Mrs. Wenban had one son, Robert, a born scientist, who, at his father's death, had declined cattle-farming and sold his station, and now devoted himself to physics and his laboratory. His laboratory was his club, his bicycle was his recreation. As his mother would not leave her own country, he waited contentedly till he should be free to establish himself in the old world, where instruments of precision are manufactured and there is a stimulating atmosphere of the men who use them. He had a guest with him, James Outram, Englishman, doctor of science and medicine, master in surgery, whom he had met and liked in London,

who, being poor and overworked, had lately travelled out as ship's doctor for the benefit of the voyage.

All the Sneerwells of Sydney might have blated the disgrace of Avis Fletcher, and the inhabitants of Gaza in Bourke's Bay would have been none the wiser; but Avis heard them in the air, and she prepared for the fact that others might hear them also. Her whole habit of mind was for the moment changed. Hitherto she had had to combat the bitterness of her own heart, and she had done so for the past eight years in mental fashion, amusing herself, working off her energy, working out her natural love of excitement by enthusiastic learning of some new thing. Now, she felt, the struggle was with human beings, and she thought to meet them best by human weapons. She made to herself friends of two men's faith, buying it with the current coin of sex—in her case of the most brilliant metal splendidly cast. From the first evening, when she sat at dinner between Robert Wenban and James Outram, she gave her whole attention to the bewilderment and distraction of both. Neither had any chance to withstand her; whatever element might otherwise be wanting for their enslavement (for the chance was small that she would represent the well-beloved to each) was supplied by the natural rivalry of two upon whom her graciousness fell impartially; and one man was quiet and languid, swept off his feet by vivacity, and the other was in the final stage of convalescence, when the chosen line is usually that of least resist-

ance. Mrs. Bolitho, looking on, could scarcely recognise her adopted daughter as an enterprising and skilful flirt. Mrs. Wenban, full of good works, her hands busy with flannel for the South Sea Islanders, her heart bearing tenderness for the unfortunate, had nothing to recognise in the clothed and fed. Avis was not careful to excuse herself in the matter, though, had she been taxed with her misdoing, excuses lay there threefold. If all the world was shortly to be against her, she must make to herself followers and henchmen; life was intolerable. If she was not to betake herself to easeful death, she must have diversion. These were men—now, since by Adam came sin in her microcosm also, then upon the sons and brothers of Adam should revenge be taken. Let them suffer—indeed, the more the better! So she smiled on Dr. Outram, who rowed her about the harbour, and she smiled on Mr. Wenban, who hired her a bicycle and gave her lessons in the art of riding it. As a pastime, Avis found men most interesting, and she wondered that she had never tried them before; moreover, the game was extraordinarily easy. A woman moves upon the foundation of sex as a good swimmer in deep water, with absolute confidence. She felt she could do no wrong.

Mrs. Bolitho, after ten days of growing astonishment, in which she had formulated every conceivable explanation of the new behaviour, could contain herself no longer.

“My dear,” she said, “I really must ask you: what are you doing with these two men?”

Avis answered coolly : "I am doing unto others as they have done to me."

"Do you care about either of them?"

"Not at all."

"The young one, Dr. Outram—I say nothing of Robert Wenban, who is old enough to take care of himself, if a man is ever that—Dr. Outram is poor; he could not possibly marry."

"I don't want him to marry."

"Do you want to break his heart?"

"Suppose I do. I am there for my pains, as the French say; men's hearts don't break. They crack and crack and make a lot of noise, and then they recover to the normal. I assure you, aunty dear, I have no more pity for men than for mosquitoes."

She caught a trumpeting insect in her hand as she spoke and flicked its corpse away with a finger.

"My dear, you are talking of half the world."

Avis was lying in a long chair with her feet up before her. Ibsen's plays were on her lap. She stared at the paper cover of her book and meditated an answer which did not come.

"Do you get your ideas to-day from that extraordinary Norwegian?"

"I get from him nothing but a general notion that more is laid upon life—by moral philosophers—than it can bear. Now, aunty, you have preached sex to me all the years I have known you, and all these years I have ignored it. Well, it seems to me that the world is reasonable and accountable and moral enough outside of sex. As long as I look upon my fellow-creatures merely as fellow-creatures

called arbitrarily men and women, but really all the same, my actions are sensible and humane and according to rule—I walk on firm land. But the moment I plunge into the sea of sex, I find a whirl of opposing forces, an anarchy of jealousy and manoeuvre and prejudice and every kind of emotion, big and little. The sex world is everlastingly at war, essentially anarchical. I recognise no moral law in it. It is base. ‘Him that uttered nothing base’ was a mooning old bachelor—” Avis laughed, frowned at her own shoes and concluded: “Leave me alone, aunty dear. I have become what is called a woman!”

“A woman should be everything that is good,” said Mrs. Bolitho sharply, at the end of her wits.

“Why?” said Avis. “How? It is a literary fiction. The men who write books, being men, are each in love with some woman, who has every virtue because she has a dimple in her cheek, or because she has a soothing way with him!”

“Women write books too.”

“Yes; and they, as women, keep up the fiction.”

“What do you call Mrs. Wenban and her beautiful life?”

“She is old; she has ceased to be a woman, and returned to the moral plane.”

“I am thoroughly annoyed with you!”

“Of course you are! Some day, perhaps before long, I also shall return, and then you will like me again.”

“And in the meantime?”

‘In the meantime,’ Avis interrupted, with a

careless laugh, "another mosquito!" She clapped her hands together, and humanity was free of a pest.

Robert Wenban presented his tall, thin figure and pallid face.

"Miss Fletcher," he said solemnly, "do you think it too hot to try the theatre to-night? I hear of a farce that is extremely laughable ——"

"It's never too hot to laugh," she answered, and the brilliant look of pleasure, the look he was wanting to see, was turned upon him.

"Then, may I get three places?" He moved his eyes reluctantly and addressed Mrs. Bolitho.

"Yes, but no stairs, remember, and remember, both of you, it is to be a farce—that is understood. No tragedy."

CHAPTER XIV

CARADON BOLITHO and his wife, returned from Melbourne were visiting a frivolous couple named Newbiggin—a couple of their own age and mind, through whose trim little cottage on Rock Point there passed all the talk of the City. It was a cottage with a double coach-house—a cottage of gentility ; and, in the opinion of Josephine, it was the cheeriest halting-place in Sydney. A large house has strong attractive power, if only that of mass, but a little house, generously conducted, draws visitors like a magnet. It is easy to slip in by a little gate that bars only a yard or two of gravel walk ; and the nervous, the carelessly dressed, have nothing to fear from the linear perspective of a small drawing-room, where the window-light, moreover, is comfortably low.

Dora Newbiggin had callers all day long. The front-door was generally open, and the road was so near to the front-door that to “drop in for a moment” was hardly otherwise than going on about their business, and the lazy might sit silent for an hour with an unsmoked cigarette, and the lively might make music on various instruments or listen to it, and the hungry one or the thirsty was sure of excellent refreshment, and it was asked of him or of her only to be civil and unceremonious, and to take nothing too seriously.

Keen, open-eared young sparks, diners-out, club-

men, Caradon Bolitho and Jack Newbiggin knew that rumour was abroad concerning Avis, but they were accustomed to the Athenian malice of their capital, and heard it with a shrug and an explanatory acknowledgment of our heroine's beauty, and it was not till the dart of the *Live Un* that they became serious. It happened that the household was breakfasting together.

"Let it be understood," said Pheenie, "that this establishes no precedent. Had I known that the three of you were up and down, I would have taken another bath or gone back to bed to put in another half-hour, anyhow. I might as well be in my own house, if anything is expected of me at breakfast-time."

Jack Newbiggin was reading the *Live Un*. There was no subscription for it at the Den, but somehow its flaring cover appeared there invariably, and it was read with shrugs, or chuckles, or indignation, without malice, but as a matter of course. Jack encountered the particular paragraph, whistled with consternation, and threw the journal over to Caradon, who, having also read, flushed angrily, declared the matter past bearing, swore to thrash the editor, and passed the print to his wife. She took the matter more calmly, finished her coffee, brushed a crumb of toast from the lace of her morning-gown, and said coolly :

"Well, you know what the *Live Un* is. I don't see that we can do anything."

"Can't do anything! when it's my mother and my adopted—cousin! Something must be done!"

"What, pray? There *is* a mystery about Avis."

"Bunkum! Some fellow in England jilted her when she was in her teens, and she has chosen to sulk about it ever since, that's all."

"Chosen to sulk at a distance of twelve thousand miles, and the back-blocks at that!"

"None of your Melbourne airs, Pheenie. To my knowledge you've never been within a hundred miles of the back-blocks in your life."

Caradon resented depreciation of Wamagatta.

"Her health, wasn't it?" said Dora Newbiggin artlessly.

"Health? Well, perhaps," drawled Pheenie. "Certainly New South Wales agrees with her. She rode twenty miles on a hired horse, a notorious puller, in a black northeaster the other day, and spent the evening listening to German chamber music. My health wouldn't bear that, I know."

"Oh, these red-headed people!" said Jack Newbiggin; "they've the deuce and all of 'vim' in 'em. And look at her shoulders! there's lungs for you!"

"It *was* her lungs," said Pheenie faintly.

"Confound her lungs! What are you driving at?" demanded Caradon, wrathful. "Do you mean to infer that Avis is a shady character, and that my mother either does or does not know it?"

"My dear husband, I never could infer anything satisfactory," answered his wife. "I gave up the attempt long ago; but your 'cousin's' honour is my own."

"Of course," said Dora; and as she took her time to read the paragraph, she wondered, repeating her

"of course," whether the honour of the adopted cousin of a friend's husband could be said to be one's own. On such a scale, it seemed to her, were established vendetta and its responsibilities.

"Sydney will be all agog with it," said Caradon. "My mother and Avis will be stared at wherever they go."

"They'll be none the wiser," said Pheenie. "They wouldn't lay a little finger on the *Live Un*."

"See what comes to us of touching pitch," said Jack remorsefully. "And you can't do anything, you know, Caradon; you can only leave it to the grand ignorance of the Volumnias of the squattocracy—splendid mouthful that!"

"'Aureolined' is abominable! I should mind that part," observed Dora.

"You are not Avis," answered Pheenie. "I know myself the superb disdain of one's fellow-creatures that comes of being thoroughly well dressed, but I imagine it to be nothing at all compared with the disdain of being thoroughly handsome. I remember a bicycling journeyman parson, Oxford classic, who spent a night at Wamagatta. Avis chose to be particularly shabby that evening, and as mum as a mute. But the poor young man gazed at her hungrily as long as she vouchsafed to show herself to his eyes, and then confided to me (to *me*, who am nothing if not modern) that he felt as if he had been introduced to Olympus."

"Who wrote the thing, that's what I want to know?" fumed Caradon.

"You *may* want. Are you going to walk with

me to my place of business this morning?" returned his host, who was a member of the Junior Bar, not yet in great request.

"My place of business to-day is the office of the *Live Un*; and my business there is to break every bone in the editor's vile body," returned the other, full of rancour.

The gate clicked, and a damsel in spotless print, scarlet-hatted, rustling with starch, overflowing with lively words, entered upon the breakfast-party and presented them with plans for the day.

The Wenbans and the Newbiggins lived on different planes, and guests at Gaza saw but little, except by special effort, of the guests at the Den. Caradon said of his mother during the following days, when the social air was full of conjecture and resolution about Avis, that she lived in a fool's paradise, than which there are certainly many worse places of residence, and if permanence could be insured for it, no man would live elsewhere than in his favourite folly. Pheenie reflected considerably. She had a thorough knowledge of the world she lived in, and of her own power as a young matron without fear or reproach, and she decided that its benefit should be given to Avis, as to one who had been entertained by her own mother-in-law, an admirable woman, with sons to whom she was devoted, whose happiness would never have been endangered by an undesirable proximity. Pheenie did not, however, like the position, and would have given much to know the true facts of it.

A week later the inhabitants of the Den found

themselves bidden to dine at Gaza. The Wenbans were lazy in hospitality, and when they gave dinners, it was on a large scale, which betrayed effort and insured infrequency. Pheenie was curious to see who had been brought together to do honour to Mrs. Bolitho and Miss Fletcher. Fourteen persons awaited the butler's announcement in the big drawing-room. Besides the house-party, the Newbiggins, herself and her husband, there were present Sir Osbert Wavertree, an English baronet, commanding H.M.S. *Mollyhawk*, of the squadron, and his daughter; Judge McKinnon, of the Supreme Court, a widower, shrewd and humorous; and a couple known generally as the Jimmy Winches, being an Australian barrister in large practice and his young wife, pretty, a little malicious through emptiness of head, not above a moderate flirtation.

The hostess and the Wavertrees excepted, there was no one among them to whom Avis wasn't for the moment, if no more, a chief interest. To Mrs. Bolitho she was a sick child; to the men of the house she was a rising sun, whose dazzle filled the world; to the guests, in varying aspect, she was the victim of the *Live Un*; and she knew it all, and prescribed for herself accordingly. She knew that they would all look at her; looks, therefore, should be invited, compelled, lest they should seem to be feared. She dressed herself in silk brocade, coloured like a rich red orange, with a necklet—a valuable family ornament, of gold, enamelled in green and red, said to be true Renaissance work—round the ivory of her throat. She came in last upon the

company, wearing a smile carefully practiced before the mirror—a smile in which there was no human emotion whatever; a smile that was merely brilliant. Mrs. Bolitho, to whom the dress and manner were entirely new, thought, in delight, “How splendid my girl looks!” Pheenie, intensely critical, with her long-handled eyeglass, saluted a successful audacity. Mrs. Jimmy Winch pursed her lips, and made an instantaneous mental conclusion in favour of the aureoline hypothesis. Dora Newbiggin was puzzled, and said to herself, “No wonder they talk!” Miss Wavertree, an amateur in painting, made a step forward, and whispered impulsively to the Judge at her elbow, “Oh, what a lovely Titian creature! Why can’t I do portraits?” The men accepted her, staring from all points like a mob of cattle—accepted her variously, in regard of their previous conception, as the female regnant triumphant. Avis felt it all, and despised every one of them. “Monkeys! slaves of the eye!” she called them behind her unaltered smile. “A large doll would attract you all equally. The fellow-being nearly desperate, the other human soul, eternal, limitless, lonely, is nothing to you. Even the handsome body would fail to stir you if it were shabbily clothed, but you are all respectful and admiring because I fitted it with costly yellow, and submitted my distracted head to a hairdresser.” The anger was unfair. She had accomplished her purpose; their scattered purpose did but acknowledge the power of concentrated will. We know, however, that justice is not of earth.

Mrs. Wenban beamed upon the company as they filed away before her, and her companion, the baronet, answered her smile of contentment, saying whimsically :

"Wonderful what pretty things they are, pretty ladies."

His hostess looked at him in perplexity.

"A sailor, you know, is particularly susceptible," he continued. "The long weeks afloat with the ugly sex. I have been cruising lately round the islands, and I feel very grateful for an invitation to eat an excellent dinner among such charming human beings."

"Your daughter is not the least charming of them," said Mrs. Wenban kindly, looking at the well-grown young woman with the blooming cheek who had just taken her seat between Caradon and Robert.

"Her father likes to think so," he replied. "Our boasted English colouring bears any setting. But there is a distinctly Australian complexion—perhaps I should call it distinctly of Sydney—which I find very agreeable. A faint uniform tone. Whether pink or brown, shows through a clear opacity, if I may be allowed a paradox. The skin is beautifully clear and uniform, the tint singularly delicate. It comes, I fancy, from the damp heat of your climate, which perhaps lowers vitality while it preserves tissue. Do I talk nonsense?"

"I have an epicure in ladies' looks here," said Mrs. Wenban, leaning across him to Mrs. Bolitho. "What shall I do with him?"

"Tell him to survey the house," was the quick answer, as she glanced over the table, of which the low-lying decorations in lilies, orchids, and passion-flowers made no hindrance to sight or conversation. "There is a selected variety of loveliness. I have heard that Sir Osbert is given to epigram; he will find none that will include so much variety."

"And yet," said Judge McKinnon, her companion, "men are apt to say that women are all alike."

"You take my words out of my mouth," said Mrs. Bolitho. "A sign that age advances. Twenty years ago not even the flippancy of the Bar could have got in a sentence before me."

"I apologise; but I knew the observation had to come," said the Judge, "and you Bush people get very leisurely in your ways. A month in Sydney, now ——"

"And you would do as I always do when my dinner-mate has a bright hazel eye—you would wait for the champagne to cross swords with her." Sir Osbert finished his sentence.

"Really, between you two," the Judge objected, "it is I who must feel superannuated. I had best retire from the board and the Bench together."

"You believe in the eye?" asked Mrs. Bolitho.

"The eye for the wits and the mouth for the heart, madam; that is my rule of conduct."

"Oh ay. And in the jurisdiction of courts-martial it doesn't matter, except to your own pride, how often it misleads you," said Judge McKinnon. "Things are rare and easy for you, service men. Of what use for a man in *my* position to be opinioned

in the matter of an eye or a mouth? *Pinioned* is he by the respectable stupidity of good men and true; pegged down, I tell you, by the myriad woodenhead of the public!"

"Nothing for nothing, Mr. McKinnon," said Mrs. Bolitho; "they can't make *you* retire. Sir Osbert may—no doubt does—bluster and stamp upon his quarter-deck; but his days are numbered."

"True," said the Captain sadly; "and there will remain no outlet to me except an occasional letter to the *Times*. *Eheu fugaces!* Let us look at the young people! I grudge them no whit of their advantages, and yet I would that my veins were still elastic enough to bound in due appreciation of that golden head down there."

His look led theirs to Avis, graciously accepting the marked attention of her host, and the continual observations of the dark shrewd face of the English surgeon, and the comment of those who pleased.

Phenie, regarding her at her ease across Jack Newbiggin's shirt-front, drawled to him softly:

"The *Live Un* would say that its worst information was confirmed."

"Tremendous, isn't she?" he murmured back. "What a header Wenban has taken!"

"Dress," said Judge McKinnon, in a moment's pause in the general conversation, "is a very great force."

"Dressmakers," said Mrs. Jimmy Winch foolishly, "are a very great fraud."

"Why, I wonder, do we British men so neglect it?" said Dr. Outram in strong, rapid tones.

"We not only neglect it, we condemn it utterly," said Mr. Winch.

"The innate vanity of your sex," said Avis softly to Caradon. "You think of yourselves as of beauty unadorned adorned the most."

Robert Wenban heard her, and aimed his voice at her as he turned to Miss Wavertree.

"Yet any man of us here, I suppose," he said, "is entitled to wear some distinctive dress, more or less handsome, in sign of something that he has done or does. The Judge has robes and a wig, Sir Robert has his uniform, and my friend Outram is a popinjay in yellow and scarlet as a London Doctor of Science, and purple and scarlet as something else. Myself, I am a humble Bachelor of Arts, authorised to hang a hood of rabbit's fur round my shoulders."

"To say nothing of the cherry stuff gown and the engaging little fee-bags," said Newbiggin.

"Leave me out; I've no feathers of dignity," said Caradon.

"What, not your polo cap and shirt?" said Avis.

"If you come to that, there's cricket and football," he said.

"Quite so: and the fox-hunter's pink, and golf buttons and coats, and— Why, I believe the cycling clubs have some distinguishing bit of finery," Dora Newbiggin contributed an apposite mite of information.

"The fact is," said Miss Wavertree, "that you men, in dress as elsewhere, have all the rights, and we women have none; but we have also no limits, and so we assume what we please."

"It shows the little value of rights," said Mrs. Bolitho; "a fee-bag in Court, a cricket cap in the field. Give me privilege!"

"Madam," said Sir Osbert, "I am sure you have always had it. I should like to say, however, that Judge McKinnon and I feel the highest reverence for the uniforms we wear, because they are not our own; they are Her Majesty's."

"Which proves the rule!" said Mrs. Bolitho complacently.

"In praise of privilege!" cried Dr. Outram. "I should protest if I heard it from a man, but from a lady — I am a Radical, I suppose, and Mrs. Wenban calls one a materialist and everything that is most upsetting, but I feel there must be privilege for a lady."

Miss Wavertree laughed that she appreciated the liver-wing of the chicken, and took it always without any self-reproach, but never, in her own soul, saw any reason for its being given to her.

"The whole question of chivalry," said Robert Wenban.

"Speaking for Bolitho and myself, we decline the case," said Jack Newbiggin. "I made shift to learn the language of law, but I refuse to undertake that of chivalry."

"I have always understood that law and chivalry are opposed," said Miss Wavertree.

"Why, of course," said the Judge. "The law in chivalry is woman's will."

"Which claims the character of fools," said Mrs. Bolitho.

"A *maxima charta*," suggested Sir Osbert.

"They're too clever for me to-night," Mrs. Winch complained to her host. "Why do you ask ordinary people to meet them?"

"What do you like to talk about?" he asked her.

"Little things—scandal, cricket."

"I am so sorry," he said gravely; "we never talk scandal at my mother's table, and, for my part, I take no interest whatever in cricket."

"A duffer at it, were you?" she returned. "Let us talk about people, then. How long have you known Miss Fletcher? Who is she?"

"An Englishwoman," he answered.

"I could tell that by her allowance of bone," replied Mrs. Winch coolly. "We Cornstalks are often tall, but we don't run as massive as they do in the old country. I suppose you know all about her?"

Wenban bowed. His thoughts were too much on Avis to like speech concerning her. He was a shy man in a shy mental state. Moreover, he knew almost nothing about her.

"I love England. What part of it does she come from, do you know?" persisted Mrs. Jimmy Winch.

Wenban considered, then remembered.

"The South, I believe; Southamptonshire I think I have heard. Won't you try that curry? I know it of old."

"Thanks; I never eat hot things," answered the young lady, and turned away to Outram, who sat on her right, asking: "What part of England do you come from?"

"From the monstrous heart of it—London," he replied promptly.

"Are you globe-trotting, then?" she continued idly.

"No, I think not."

"Going to settle out here?"

"I am afraid not."

"What *are* you doing, then, if one may ask?" she laughed.

"I am banqueting in heaven, I rather fancy," he replied slowly.

"Is that the curry?"

"No, the angels."

He made her a little bow, and looked all round the table, his eye pausing, as Mrs. Winch expected, for an instant at Avis.

"And the old ladies?" she asked.

"I like them best of all," he answered, and listened to Avis, who was telling Judge McKinnon across the table that she had often thought of reviving Bushranging in her own person.

"You'd be taken directly," said Caradon.

"I can ride," said Avis.

"Yes, but you've also got to hide."

"There are unsurveyed districts, in the north of the colony, absolutely wild," she answered; "and I can shoot. I picture the dismay of the lumbering coach-loads—commercial travellers, children going between home and school, and such-like, when I bail them up."

"She is extraordinarily unfeminine," said Mrs. Jimmy Winch to the man on either side.

Outram, resenting the criticism, threw it boldly into the midst of the company.

"It is suggested that the Bushranger's vocation is unfeminine," he said. "Will any one present define 'unfeminine'?"

Mrs. Winch was accustomed to better treatment than this. She knit her pretty eyebrows, and looked at her husband, who answered shortly:

"Definitions are often, I think, merely vexatious. There are certain things one knows instinctively by common-sense; the meaning of 'unfeminine' is one of them."

"I delight in definitions," said Outram stoutly, "and I take upon myself to define common-sense as the lowest common intellectual factor. I ask, however, for the meaning of 'unfeminine.'"

"If you would make it *feminine*," put in Pheenie, "I would reply, among other things, me."

Every one present turned upon her, and found no cause for cavil in the small quaint face, the long, slight frame in elegant tones of fawn-colour and lilac.

"Every lady would say the same," observed Jack Newbiggin.

"I am not so sure of that," answered Miss Wavertree, laughing. "I don't accept the adjective without knowing the mind of him who applies it. There are a lot of men who, in their inmost hearts, mean by feminine foolish."

"I mean charming," replied Jack.

"You mean goose!" retorted his wife. "You married me! What do you think, Judge?"

The great man considered.

"If she will only be beautiful," he answered slowly, "she may do anything, and it will be right."

"Jupiter nods!" cried Mrs. Bolitho, with a malicious tap of her fan upon his arm.

"Rhadamanthus, rather," said Avis softly, to no one in particular.

"I am certain Joan of Arc was beautiful," put in Sir Osbert, "and Grace Darling; and we know that Nell Gwynne was."

"I protest!" said Mrs. Wenban earnestly. "I don't discuss Joan of Arc, though I cannot think a woman's place is a battle-field; and I could not imagine any one caring what that noble creature Grace Darling looked like; but Nell Gwynne——"

"I brought her in as an antithesis, with apology," said Sir Osbert.

"What has her beauty to do with it?" continued Mrs. Wenban.

"Speaking as a mere man, everything," answered the Baronet mildly; "but I drift into deep waters."

Mrs. Wenban, with the obstinacy of the gentle, persisted: "You were talking about beauty making things right." She looked at the elder men indignantly.

"The Bench gives judgment on evidence, nothing more," answered Judge McKinnon with a shrug, and helped himself to iced gooseberry-fool.

"Do you mean," said Mrs. Bolitho, enjoying the argument, "that you would take beauty as exculpatory evidence?"

"For the men," he answered.

"And against the women?"

"Well, now, ask yourself," he said deprecatingly.

"Excuse me, Judge. It is the men who must be asked," cried Mrs. Bolitho, with indignation that was touched with sincerity. "Do you mean that beauty in women makes right in man and wrong in her at one and the same time?"

"I often sympathise when I have to condemn," he replied; "but really—my position—these young people—our old friendship, Mrs. Bolitho, and the excellence of the fool! I leave these deep waters to Sir Osbert."

"Allow me to bring my seniors back to the point—unfemininity," said Outram sternly.

"Whatever a man likes for herself," said Dora Newbiggin; "divided garments, crossed legs, a good dinner and a cigarette, freedom of speech, power of the purse——"

"Masculinity in that?" said Dr. Outram.

"Yes," answered Dora, and added softly: "All the comfortable things of life."

"Who's the goose now?" demanded her husband. "What about the trenches at Sebastopol, and the outposts of the Indian Empire, and——"

"Personal feeling appears perpetually in this argument," Outram declared. "Is it that you are all hopelessly unscientific, ladies and gentlemen, that you cannot keep to impersonal facts?"

Sir Osbert Wavertree and Mrs. Bolitho exchanged a glance of enlightenment. "You say it," she told him with a smile, and he leant forward,

his pleasant, grey-bearded face twinkled with humorous lines, as he claimed the company's attention.

"Dr. Outram, and fellow-diners, the reason is exactly there. Masculine, feminine, are the most personal and relative facts—of conditions. Eliminate the personal, and who cares if another is masculine or feminine? The world might well be of one sex. We must all disagree here. I want a feminine to my masculine, and if she be only feminine to me, then, whatever her qualities, she is my type of womanhood. If she be not the feminine of me, then what care I how feminine she be? May I propose a toast, Mrs. Wenban? and you ladies can also drink it *mutato nomine*: 'The feminine of me!'"

"You and I are drinking to our past," said Judge McKinnon, as he set down his glass.

Mrs. Jimmy Winch, not greatly concerned for her husband's health, had eyes to notice that two men drank to Avis, who for her part just tasted the wine, as unresponsive as civility allowed.

"You might as well have spared my poor little remark," said Mrs. Winch to the surgeon, with some sharpness. "You got no definition, only general fireworks."

"Very good fireworks, some of them," he answered; "that is my excuse."

The ladies left the room, Avis going last, slowly, with Mrs. Bolitho on her arm. Sir Osbert and the gentlemen of the house watched them along the hall in their striking contrast: the faultless figure

in its golden audacity, the train of rich-hued silk unrolling stately in its wake; the little limping form, keen with points of diamonds, its little brown hand clutching and sparkling on the knob of the supporting ebony.

Sir Osbert turned to his host, who stood by him.

"I shall thank you henceforth for a valuable memory," he said, and as he spoke he made a note of the man's expression—"The feminine of Robert Wenban, in Robert Wenban's opinion!"

Avis led Mrs. Bolitho to a comparatively cool seat by an open window, and herself went out to the verandah, drawing a deep breath. It was a stifling night. The air was dense with moisture, and a fallen wind stirred languidly from the north-east; the savour of it was soft and tropical, and mingled with the heavy scent of a flowering creeper that grew along the parapet—a savour of abundant vegetation, drawn from the long low shores of the harbour. The wave of Bourke's Bay lapped lazily on the sandy fringe beyond the garden wall; ships at anchor in Port Jackson showed their lights; a siren wailed piercingly. The sky was dark, the stars of it shining ineffectually through the vapour.

Avis felt nothing except a need of air, to brace her for the coming struggle, but the tepid fluid round her was scarcely such that it should edge the mental Excalibur which alone she feared would stand her in stead. Weary of the dull safety of her fortress, she had ventured into the open field. What were her arms? Warning shots had whizzed close to her; she saw the face of her fellow-crea-

tures, that of a hostile army. What was her defence against them? What definite gain had she set before herself to fight for? She caught her own reflection in a glass door curtained within, at an end of the verandah. She saw herself vaguely big and imposing, full of colour. "I have to declare myself their equal; ah, and better than most," she told herself.

The siren screamed as one might imagine a demon in pain, and the sound ran through her like a sudden despair. "Oh, if it were flesh and blood that is against me!" she cried in her heart; "but it is principalities and powers, the spirit of high places; the laws that are unwritten and unspoken!" Her arms rose and fell again to her side, expressive of her mood. The great vague figure on the window moved likewise. "Alas, poor Titan women!" she thought, "defying the Gods of convention!" Again as often, uncalled, undesired, there came the recollection of a stalwart shoulder squaring up by her own, bringing a compelling sense of strong service, of warm sympathy, of a strange sweet union of souls. The enemy was upon her. Mrs. Winch, pink-robed, dainty, a little disdainful, came out to her, leading a company—the servant with the coffee-tray, Dora Newbiggin plying a large fan, Miss Wavertree, talking rapidly in a pleasant voice about the heat.

"Did you think you were to have it all to yourself outside?" said Dora. "There we were, the whole pack of us, gathered about the window like the historical witches at Calcutta, and Paula Winch

suggested that we might find ourselves cooler in the verandah."

Avis took her coffee and smiled upon them all.

"We ought to have underground chambers this weather. I can't think why we don't," she said.

"There's a trifle of air stirring," called Mrs. Winch, looking back within. "Pheenie, I think it's better outside, really."

Pheenie appeared irresolute.

"Don't talk to me!" she said. "As if I didn't know your Sydney northeasters. They take all the curl out of my hair and my spirits together. No, if I am to be damp, I prefer my own dampness to that of the atmosphere."

Mrs. Winch laid a constraining hand upon her, saying:

"Leave the drawing-room to the dowagers for their nap."

"It's the mosquitoes I mind," said Miss Wavertree, flapping round herself with a palm-leaf.

"Oh, do they bite you?" asked Mrs. Winch. "They don't like all English people; they don't seem to touch Miss Fletcher."

"Oh, are you English?" cried Miss Wavertree, turning to Avis eagerly, glad, as is the way of her kind, to find a compatriot; glad also of an opportunity for speech with the splendid Titian creature.

They were a singularly equal pair, of about the same age, birth, education, each of more than ordinary good favour, only so different that they might be the better friends; and Miss Wavertree advanced in friendly salute, which Avis would fain

have returned in like spirit, but she knew it could not be. She measured distance and engaged an adversary's blade.

"Yes, I am English," she answered quietly, putting down her empty cup; "but I have been out here so long that mosquitoes are tired of me."

"And you never give them a rest, like most of us do, by going home for a trip, do you?" said Mrs. Jimmy Winch.

Pheenie regarded the young lady critically. She would act second to Avis, but the quarrel was none of hers, and the lines of attack and defence were unknown. She took a seat and waited.

"No, I have never been home since I came out," said Avis, smiling.

"And is that long?" inquired Miss Wavertree, very amiable, very much interested in her radiant countrywoman, full of admiration also for the gold necklet with its lovely red and green enamel.

"Eight years."

"Dear me! Surely you are sometimes homesick."

"One is everything by turns."

Mrs. Winch grew impatient. The combatants were not advancing at all; they were saluting at the greatest possible length. She must force the stranger to attack.

"Didn't I hear some one say that you two belong to the same county?" she said.

Pheenie and Dora Newbiggin exchanged glances. They appreciated the position keenly. They knew enough of England to understand the clannishness

of the county, the divine right of inquiry given to Miss Wavertree by the announcement of such kinship. Paula Winch had forced the wrist of Avis, and she stood suddenly inviting in tierce. Miss Wavertree fainted gladly.

"Oh, do you really belong to Southamptonshire?" she asked. "Then you must know our old place, Wavertree. Bere is our village and station and post-town and everything."

Avis passed the feint, accepting it.

"I remember," she said; "pond with lots of yellow irises, and main street mostly chequered houses."

"Yes, yes!" cried Miss Wavertree joyfully; "such a dear place! I am so glad you know it. I dare say we know some of the same people, too. What is your part? Anywhere near mine?"

Full lunge and hit. Mrs. Winch smiled. Mrs. Newbiggin leaned a little forward with parted lips. Mrs. Caradon Bolitho seemed to grow more limp in her chair.

Avis took the hit, and acknowledged it fully. Standing firmly erect and smiling as before, she answered in clear tones, scorning evasion:

"I belong to the other side of the county, the west. Coleminster is our town. Do you remember the cathedral chimes? They play every three hours except when service is going on. They begin with 'Life let us cherish.'"

A passion of homesickness swept over her as she spoke; the smile died out. The gas-lit verandah, the steamy, tropical night, the heavy odours, the

four young women in bright array faded, and instead sweet faltering notes from old, old bells floated about an exquisite Gothic spire, which rose straight from a broad lawn, faultless with the care of centuries. In the great elm, greenening with spring, the pairing rooks cawed. For an instant she was entirely detached from her surroundings; then she saw sympathy beaming from Miss Wavertree's charming eyes, and warm words declared:

"I love those chimes, too."

Avis was conscious of a swift impulse toward friendship; then, recollecting, she hid herself behind the new non-committing smile, and went on with the tale expected of her:

"I will introduce myself. You will know the name of my uncle, Mr. Wilbraham of Wilswick; my mother and my stepfather, Mr. Bengough, live at his place, Wilsdean. My father, who is dead, was Vicar of Coleswick, where I was born. Do all these names mean anything to you?"

Avis spoke lightly, but she watched Miss Wavertree's face, and the other three watched them both. Miss Wavertree looked puzzled, hesitated.

"Of course I know your uncle," she said; "one of the kindest of the bluff old Tory squire school, and—and—" She paused. "Are you, then, the absent daughter of that very, that particularly handsome Mrs. Bengough of Wilsdean? I have so often seen her driving about the lanes when I have been staying with the Wigans."

She seemed speaking to cover her thoughts. Her face flushed slightly; the poise of her head became

a little stiff. She looked at Avis, still erect and smiling, with an expression in which distress, deprecation, politeness to a fellow-guest were mingled yet distinct. There was no unkindness ; no further question. The three who watched them were impressed chiefly with a sense of Miss Wavertree's regret.

"Thank you so much, Miss Fletcher, for so kindly telling me about yourself. Your mother is so delightfully handsome and regal-looking, and *so good* ; every one in the county knows that she is as good as she is handsome."

Miss Wavertree bowed slightly, Miss Fletcher bowed slightly, the one a little more pink, the other a little more pale, but, except for the throbbing out cry in the throat, apparently unmoved and at her ease.

Dora and Pheenie exchanged a glance of agreement—"There *is* something!" Then said Dora aloud, with a puff of protest :

"The northeaster is entirely gone."

"Bet you two to one in shillings," drawled Pheenie, "that we have a southerly within a quarter of an hour."

"Done," said Dora.

A stick tapped on the tiles, and Mrs. Bolitho joined them, saying :

"I will not have a horsy daughter to my house!"

"Oh, we all know," said Mrs. Winch impudently, "it is a patent of nobility—as things go in a new country, of course—to be allowed inside Mrs. Bolitho's house."

"You have never been there, my dear, have you?" said the elder lady dryly; and Dora laughed.

Miss Wavertree, still with a troubled expression, pulled a spray of ficus that grew on a verandah pillar. Avis fanned herself leisurely and took a seat.

"Oh, not me! not frisky young matrons!" said Mrs. Winch, and looked at Avis.

"True," said Mrs. Bolitho, following the look, "one frisky old dowager is enough for one house, and I have had to mate her with a golden statue of a girl to make the balance right."

Mrs. Winch tossed her head.

"Our conversation has been so interesting," she said. "Miss Wavertree knows all about Miss Fletcher's people at home, and all about herself, and they have become, as you see, the greatest imaginable friends at once."

Now, Miss Wavertree at a little distance, standing gracefully by the parapet, was plucking at the spray of ficus with an absent and troubled profile, and Miss Fletcher, sitting down several yards nearer, wore her fixed smile of absolute indifference. Dora and Pheenie exchanged another glance, which meant "Brat!" Mrs. Bolitho, seizing the main facts by intuition, turned to the young Englishwoman with her most encouraging air.

"Are my old friends yours, then? How pleasant for us all! But Sydney is a place where there is no time to make new friends; you must come to us at Wamagatta, Miss Wavertree, and we will all talk over everything English that we know."

Miss Wavertree's answer remained unheard, for the southerly blast struck the house at that instant. Every door, wide open for air, slammed like a gunshot, every window strained and rattled; the trees in the garden roared and rustled wildly; the harbour lights were blotted out in a storm of dust; the temperature fell immediately several degrees as the fierce, cold wave swirled over the land. Further diversion was caused by the appearance of the men, and in a moment the verandah was empty of all but dust and Avis, who lingered, bracing her bare neck to the wind. Dr. Outram, missing her among the company of ladies, stepped out to advise her against a chill. Her answer startled him.

"Do I look like illness of any sort? Yet sometimes in the midst of life one may wish one's self in death."

CHAPTER XV

THE shearing was over at Burrabindar. The wool teams were away with the wool-bales; the wool-shed was empty; the denuded sheep were given back to their spacious monotony of sunlight, wherein to forget their helplessness, their wounds and their alarms. In the twilight of his common-room, deep within the verandah, the open windows wired against mosquitoes and darkened with folding blinds, Hazell sat and cleaned his weapons till they might have been shown in the shop of a Bond Street gunsmith, and when their radiance defied improvement, he whiled away the days in devising a bag of double canvas by means of which a wall of water might keep his butter from relapsing into oil as soon as it had been reclaimed from milk. He was an ingenious fellow, and could sew like a sailor; but the work was dreary, dreary. Sitting thus, one hot morning, when the ferocious sun, only four hours up, had raised the shade temperature to 85°, and the flies buzzed triumphantly in the invigoration of it, he heard a slow step on the uncarpeted passage, and a dry voice saying:

“Oh ay! I’ll find him.”

The unexpected figure of Alexander Proudfoot, clothed in dusty black alpaca, appeared at the door, with an unsmiling request.

"Muster Hazell, may I request the favour of a breakfast?"

A human being—one might say a friend! The squatter welcomed him, gave him the great arm-chair, turned down his own shirt-sleeves in compliment to a guest, and went out to the kitchen at the back, to order the opening of a tin of Finnan haddies.

"Ye might hae been awa'," said the visitor, as they ate together, "wi' the maist o' the sheep farmers o' the distreect; but there was nae word o' yeer passing through Beulah lately, and I thocht I'd reesk it."

"Sydney attracts me very feebly," answered Hazell. "My friends—so far as a fogey of my age can be said to have any friends left—are not on this side of the world, and I have seen so many cities. But I suppose the countryside is empty?"

"Juist aboot that. They're all awa' to the metropolis, to discoont their wool sales by hotel bills."

"Better wait a bit. The crop this year is light. Yes, indeed; I know little enough about my neighbours, and care less, but I had fancied one or two days lately, when I was up the run, that the world seemed even quieter than usual. Shows what fancy will do."

"I'm not sae sure. There's a feeling in the air when things are brisk, why not when they are dull?"

"Three leagues from the nearest station-house?"

"And why not? I'm no great believer in distance and space and such-like human leemits.

There's something in the human soul, Muster Hazell, that's above and beyont the leemits o' the human body. Do ye remember the words o' Carlyle—Thomas Carlyle—and though I'm not altogether o' his opeenion in many ways, there's no gainsayin' that he had the speerit o' the Lard in vayrious matters: 'Is not the dead, the dear, the distant, while I love it and mourn it and look for it, as truly here, in the real sense, as the ground I stand on?'"

Hazell started involuntarily as one touched intimately, and stared a little, wondering to himself if all Scotsmen were born dominies, or divines, or philosophers; then replied, English fashion:

"I am a man of action. I am afraid Carlyle is out of my beat."

"It's a guid thing, action," answered the general merchant sententiously, "and while we're in it, there seems to be naething else worth considering; but when the time comes, as it comes to the maist active o' us a', that we canna act, then we find that the real life is in the things thocht, and the only comfort is there; and the man that has given a new hope to his fellow-man has done mair than he who gave him chloroform."

"Well, well; may be. Hope, of course—the hope of recovered health—would certainly encourage one to bear the surgeon's knife; but then, if one had no hope, Mr. Proudfoot, what about the advantages of chloroform?" Hazell smiled bitterly, and changed the subject. "What about the advantages this moment as ever is of tobacco?"

"I never smoke before night."

"A strange house—a day out!" Hazell urged, rising to get his cigar-case.

"Na, na; I cannot change a' ma ways at once."

Proudfoot shook his head.

"All right; and I'm off my own smoke lately. It's a craving some men outgrow, you know—outwear, perhaps. How one used to enjoy one's weed! Nowadays, I find that I get the craving for it, or for something, and when I have lighted up, I don't care for it. As often as not, lately, I haven't even felt the want of it. Time was, I was a champion smoker. Some fellow should invent some new drug or weed, but I suppose one can wear through anything."

Standing with his back to the empty fireplace in the seasonable simplicity of a white silk shirt, white trousers and belt, the comparative slimness of his broad form was evident to the shrewd eyes that watched him. The tobacco hunger plainly was not the only thing he had lost during the late months.

"Oh ay, with a hope," answered Proudfoot.

"What a fellow you are for hope! The first day I ever saw you, when you treated me to that breakfast—we're quits now—you hammered in hope—hope for rain."

"When I was young," replied Proudfoot, "I lived to preach thrift, because I had so sair a need o't masel'. Now I preach hope for the verra same reason."

"The thrift answered well."

"I hae nae mair doot o' the return o' ma hope

than I hae o' the soundness o' the investments that are come o' ma thrift," replied Proudfoot; and his grey face as he spoke was extraordinarily long and narrow and solemn, and his little blue eyes were fixed on Hazell's with the hardness of metal.

"Well," said Hazell cheerfully, "I will begin to hope for heaven. Would you like a turn on the run? You know what you'll see—white grass, grey gums, sun on your head about 140°, few new fences, newly-shorn sheep at intervals. I've a quiet blue roan that'll carry you without fidget, or I could even drive you a mile or two, if you don't mind being bumped."

"I have had enough outdoor work for the moment, Muster Hazell. But perhaps I keep you?"

"Not at all. I am killing time just now, waiting to get the smell of lanoline out of my head after a month of the shearing shed. Waiting, by God! I don't know what I am waiting for. Death, probably, like most of us the wrong side of forty." Hazell shouted, and stared at the opposite wall with wild eyes.

"Why mak' it foorty?" said Proudfoot dryly.

"Why not? A fool or a physician then, you know. Now, a fool thinks of little; a physician naturally thinks of death. I *will* have a cigar. I have a dozen or so left of a particular brand. My brother, Mr. Proudfoot, who lives in London, is a connoisseur in cigars—gets information about particular sales. Thanks to him, I got a hundred from the effects of a certain Sir John Pennyquick who went bankrupt—superb Havanas, extra big, fra-

grant as the spicy isles. I keep them for high days and holidays."

Hazell went off to his bedroom, where they lay within lock.

The visitor nodded his long head conclusively, and his graven wrinkles softened. So great was the tenderness of the well-hidden heart that it exploded into a soliloquy of extraordinary rapture.

"He's verra winsome," he said slowly; and then, recovering control, added: "But I canna cheeange a' ma ways at once."

More or less, Hazell talked all day. In the kingdom of the blind, as we know, the one-eyed man is ruler, and he was cheered and happy in the society of the general importer, who was an excellent listener, interested to hear of what lay beyond his own experience, and considerate of his host as he might have been of an admired and valued son. Hazell had no idea how closely he was watched, nor how, as he talked of boar-hunting in India and pigeon-shooting at Monte Carlo, and the probable policy of Russia in the East, and the future of coloured labour in Australia, he was revealing himself as sore and broken without any definite hope whatever. The gay gallant who had ridden forth from the general store weeks gone by, with his face toward Wamagatta, with a war-cry of championship for Miss Fletcher, had given no sign of existence since; and the lady had left the neighbourhood, and was, by the testimony of the newspapers, distracting herself ostentatiously in the capital. Proudfoot had the faculty of minute and careful

observation common to those whose ears and eyes are exercised upon their fellow-creatures rather than upon literary matters. He had been sure during all these weeks that something had gone wrong in the relations of these two, and his visit to Burrabindar, an extraordinary effort, was undertaken from sheer human kindness toward the man and the woman who had stood by his daughter's grave.

As the fierce day waned, and the insufferable sun shot in level blaze through the bamboo blind, he delivered himself of what he had come to say. First asking that his buggy might be made ready, and expressing himself benignly in wishes for the New Year and the wool-market, he took a parting cup of tea, beloved of Australians, and stirring it for the sake of the sugar, beloved of Scotsmen, he remarked with a casual and detached air, and his gaze upon his spoon :

"Have ye heard any word further o' yon wastrel Rennard—him wi' the Bathurst burrs?"

Hazell answered gruffly, "No."

"Aweel. I hear maist things. If I had a shilling, sir, for every unnecessary word that is spoken in my shop, every word, I should say, that is no' relevant to the business o' buying and selling, I should be rich beyont the dreams o' avarice. As I was saying, it appears yon is in the distreect once again. Where he lives I dinna know; but he frequents that they ca' Paddy's Market, Saturdays, in Menheniot, and the Bushman's Arms, also in Menheniot, when the marketing's accomplished, and juist talks at lairge."

Proudfoot sipped his tea. Hazell flapped his forehead with his handkerchief, resentful of the flies that crawled over him without haste or rest, as though he were mere butcher's meat.

"Menheniot," he said between the flaps, "where exactly is that?"

"Twenty-five miles on the Great North Road."

"Rum sort of a jumble, nomenclature of new countries. Beulah to Menheniot, twenty miles."

"I have heard," said Proudfoot, rising, "that the town received its name from a manservant who came from Cornwall wi' Muster Bolitho, forty year gane."

"I was born," said Hazell, "in Kent, which people nowadays are apt to regard as a suburb of London. By Jove! For a Kentish autumn morning this blessed instant!" He flicked his head savagely, then spoke loudly and abruptly:

"I tell you, I should be afraid to be too near that ruffian Rennard. I am twice his size, probably twice his weight; if I touched him I might kill him!"

"I'm no saying," returned Proudfoot, unmoved, "that he wouldna desairve it; but the worst one may not be punished unheard. If ye chanced to be near him, ye should hear him firrst, Muster Hazell—hear him firrst."

Hazell's eyes flashed intelligently; a keener look came upon his face. "Saturday, Paddy's Market," he repeated.

"At noon—a berra warrm hour this time o' the year."

Proudfoot got into his buggy and took up the reins in both hands. He fixed a solemn look in parting upon his host, a look of overwhelming length and gravity.

"I hear," he said in his deep tone, "that yon Rennard is wanted at hame—wanted, as they say, for some misdemeanour of his youth. I gather he is here to escape the law; the ijit blethers in his cups. There should not be much trouble in silencing his tongue—when he's sober. Muster Hazell, I thank ye for a friendly day."

"I did not know," said Hazell to himself, "that I had a friend on the continent."

He caused Mina to be saddled, and cantered about the bare, hot paddocks for an hour, going hard, trying to think of nothing, conscious of a new little warmth within him; hugging it, clinging to it, and hope springing up round it without his reason, without his will. He required of Mrs. Brock a hot bath before dinner ("As though, to be sure, it was not mad enough this weather to boil one's self to rags once a day!" she complained to the kitchen). He ate his dinner with appetite, and with his coffee allowed himself yet another of the few cigars remaining from Sir John Pennyquick's store; and by eleven o'clock he had disposed himself in the hammock within the wired end of the verandah for his night's sleep. Soon after the following sunrise he was on his way to Menheniot.

Paddy's Market is an institution of which, as the name conveys, anything may be expected—anything irregular. Articles of every sort, representing the

whole indoor or outdoor furniture and personal requirements of the countryside, were presented there—not all at once, not every market-day as a matter of course, nor with any sort of order, but as they might be available and superfluous. Fowls and sucking-pigs, honey, harness, a suit of clothes, a cow or a collie-dog, a dozen of empty bottles and jam-jars, a setting of eggs—such things were sold by auction in the sunlight, before an audience of country people, townsfolk and Chinamen, sprinkled with a few of the wealthier and professional classes, who came to look on, sometimes to snatch a bargain. The business was done in a bit of enclosed ground at the back of the Bushman's Arms; a large shed giving shelter to a stall or two, and a few perishable reserves of stock, and a pen or two placed here and there held the complainant bestial that was offered for purchase.

Hazell put up his horse at the inn; his lunch had been taken on the way a few miles short of the township, and he was ready with his best attention for the coming of Rennard. The cut of his clothes—a white suit much worn—the trimness of his beard, his erect bearing, his pith helmet, marked him among the small crowd where the standard of dress and of deportment was of the most slovenly; where the lean, dry men slouched forward at the shoulder, and the lean, dry women slouched forward at the hip. Leanest and driest were the Chinese, joiners and gardeners, a small colony scattered in the small assembly, and incomparably the most amiable of countenance. It needs alcohol, or the

near prospect of it, to make our Briton jovial, under whatever sky. Tall and parched, short and parched, Rennard was not among them, and Hazell stood patiently to watch the sales.

The auctioneer, a brisk person in a tweed suit, laid aside his coat and took his stand on an empty box, which raised him above the others' shoulders, and, receiving from a hidden hand a couple of pair of fowls, he held them by the legs and asked a bid. The usual useful mongrel sort of the poultry-yard, they met with no demand. The auctioneer raised his voice. Enthusiasm and emphasis were his style, in which he might have passed muster before any jury:

"A shillin', a shillin', a shillin' a pair; prime layers or first-class for the table—a shillin', a shillin', a shillin', one shillin'—actually goin' for one shillin'. Who'll bid? who'll bid? One and three—yes, one and three, and three, and three; and six, and six—goin' for one and six—prime layers or first-class for the table. It's no price at all! Who'll bid? One *and* six! Are ye don-ne?" He waxed wild, and in a burst of generous championship raised the wretched birds aloft that all might see their advantages. They screeched and reared their hanging heads. He shook them at the apathetic audience. A woman near nodded for another three-pence; he caught it and continued in the same high scream: "And nine, and nine, and nine—one and nine. Are ye don-ne?"

A further waggles of the unhappy creatures brought to the point the stableman of the Royal

Hotel, who bore off the whole four at a shilling apiece for the consumption of his mistress's customers. Ducks followed, and turkeys; sucking-pigs were bravely handled by the auctioneer, and added their cries to his before being knocked down to a singularly stout countryman, at four and sixpence apiece. The heat was intense; moisture streamed down the auctioneer's face as he forced his voice till it rang as hard as blows on wood, forced it unsparingly, as though from a sense of what was due to his trade, for the company was small, and no other tongue strove against his. The eye of him worked as hard as the tongue; it swept his audience with unfailing perception. Never did a wavering spirit falter to a decision without his instant apprehension and declaration of it; or was it, rather, Hazell wondered, sometimes that he seized and publicly bound the unwilling, nailing them to a bargain for which they had no desire, but lacked courage to repudiate. Hazell could not decide. He followed the group to a side-pen where a shabby horse stood on sale. Its coat was rough, its head hung dully, its mouth gave evidence of hard-reining, and yet, ungroomed, ill-fed, it was a fairly good animal, better bred than would appear at a glance, for horses in bad years are more plentiful than feed. The auctioneer mounted his box.

"Make me an offer," he cried, "for a capital hack, sound wind and limb, six year old, and only wanting a little feeding to be as handsome and free-going a mount as any man needs. Broken to single and double harness, easy pacer, not a vice about

him; and you wouldn't find him in the market, I can tell you, if there were more grass in the paddocks. Make an offer! Come, ladies and gentlemen, make an offer. Sire the great Ruritanius, as any one can see who knows the distinguishing marks of that splendid creature, so highly esteemed in the district. Goin' without reserve; an unparalleled occasion. Make an offer! Handle him yourselves, gentlemen, examine him at your pleasure, and make me a handsome offer!"

With a grin, one of the louts bid ten shillings. The auctioneer took it with a shrug. "Ten shillin's! ten shillin's! This is not serious, ladies and gentlemen—a Ruritanius goin' for ten shillin's! When the years o' plenty come again you'll be sorry to remember that you let such an opportunity slip."

"I'd take the loss for the years o' plenty, mister!" some one commented shrilly.

"Ten shillin's, ten shillin's—fifteen? Thank you. Fifteen shillin's—a Ruritanius, not a vice about him and all his best years before him—fifteen. Twenty; a pound, a pound, a pound—goin' for a pound—a pound. Twenty-five—I am glad to see that there is a little respect for breed left in this company. Thirty, thirty shillin's—we're slow, ladies and gentlemen; but these are the days o' bicycles, no one can hurry for anything but a wheel. Thirty-five—thirty-five, thirty-five shillin's. Are ye don-ne? Ye're never done! Two pound, two pound, two pound—a Ruritanius! Are ye don-ne? Goin', goin' at two pound—goin', goin', gon-ne! The horse is

yours, sir, for the ridiculous sum of two pound. I'm glad, I must say, that I'm not a horse-breeder these times."

Hazell thought that he was glad too.

CHAPTER XVI

THERE were dry men, little men, lean men, in the yard of the Bushman's Arms, but no Rennard yet, and the mercury stood at 104° in the shade, the bone-dry shade. There was a maid of a pale but lively countenance, the elaboration of whose yellow hair spoke a desire to please the opposed sex. She had given a glimpse of these advantages from a side-window of the inn. Doubtless she presided at the bar. Her tea might be drinkable, and it must be *wet*. Moreover, every detail of the neighbourhood must be in her recollection. Hazell sought her in an interior which hummed with flies and reeked stalely of beer and tobacco.

"Terrible bad day," he said blandly, and took off his helmet with a slight reference to herself, and an underlying purpose of wiping his forehead.

"Oh, hot!" she replied, with the disdain of her species toward the creature man.

"And dry!" he added amiably. "Really, one doesn't know what to do this sort of weather. If one indulges one's thirst, one is drinking all day long, and not a bit the better for it; and if one doesn't drink, one gets through an amount of actual suffering. I don't say one isn't wiser to suffer ——"

"Oh, I'm nothing of a drinker," said the maid offhand. "But it ain't my business to discourage them that is."

"Of course not. Could you make me a particularly good pot of tea, do you think—strong and fresh, lots of milk, first boiling of the water, five minutes' drawing—and take a cup of it with me yourself?"

Hazell smiled insinuatingly. She relaxed to toss her head, and answered: "You do seem mighty particular, but I dare say I could do *that*; and the water don't take long to boil to-day. Set down and have a look at the piper, and mind the bar, wown't yer?"

Having given her no promise, Hazell unconscientiously leant out of the side-window and kept his eye on the yard and the market till she returned with his teapot and upbraided him.

"My word, you're keen on that old auction!" she cried. "A sharp feller might clear the whole plice out while you're watchin' it."

"The fact is," said Hazell, unabashed—"please—(I am, as you say, most awfully particular) let me pour out my own tea and yours too; I'm an old traveller, and remarkably knowing in tea—the fact is, I am here to-day on the chance of meeting some one. There, is that how you like it? *I* like it immensely. Here's to your health, Miss——"

"Bishop's my nyme, for the *present*," she replied, with a tossing head, but a relenting mouth.

"For the present only, I'm quite sure—and a short present, I should say," he answered. "Does he live in these parts?"

"Oh my, no! Sech a set about 'ere! He's a

Sydney boy. Travels for a Sydney firm. Men-heniot's a *howl*, that's what it is; nothing goin' on from one year's end to another. I couldn't live 'ere for anythink you could nyme. I like a little *life* where *I* live."

"Of course. I dare say you see a rough selection one way and another out of the Bush?"

"My word, yes! Downright *turn* yer sometimes. But this mornin' a man come in with a bungy eye and stood where you're standin', tryin' to look sweet at me with the other. If anythink mikes *me* sick, it's a bungy eye."

"A bungy eye?" repeated Hazell, polite but vague.

"Yes. Stung by a fly, yer know. I do despise a man that lets a fly stay long enough on him to sting him! I turned the laugh on him, though. There was a lot of 'em in 'ere. 'Come again when you've got two eyes to make yerself pleasant with,' I told 'im!"

Hazell smiled, but though bent on conciliation, he put in a word for the honour of his sex:

"Rather a hopeless task, though, flicking away flies in the Bush, Miss Bishop. You shouldn't be too unmerciful. Why, it might happen to *me*, you know!"

"It *might*, but it don't happen to smart boys," she answered; "and you don't want much to turn yer in the summer. 'Tain't all beer and skittles in my perfession, *I* can assure yer. Sech a row as I had 'ere, too, this mornin'; reg'lar circus it was. This is my first breakfast; I couldn't touch a thing

before, not ever so. Quite upset *me*, I know. If it hadn't a-been for that, I mightn't a-been so quick with the fool with the bungy eye."

"Tell me about this circus," said Hazell, helping himself to a third half-pint of tea.

"It was a selector from seventy miles and more out back; been 'ere before for the night, and put his horse up each time. The boss was out this mornin', and I had to give 'im his bill. 'Eighteen-pence for the horse!' says he as soon as he see it. 'Why, it was ninepence last time! I shan't pay anything of the kind!' 'And didn't your horse 'ave a bob-tail last time?' says I; 'and hasn't he got a long tail this time? It's our rule: we always charge double for a long-tailed horse, because he eats double (swishes away the flies with his tail, yer know, while he gryzes; and with a bob 'e's kept goin' most of the time lookin' round and bitin' at the flies). It's our rule,' I says. 'I don't care a—' I wouldn't repeat it; it wasn't language for a lady's ears what he said. It *did* upset *me*, I know! Had to get in McDally the constable before he'd pay and go. I couldn't make 'im without the boss to back me up. Oh, they're a *set*, the men about 'ere!"

"Poor Miss Bishop!" said Hazell sympathetically, and looked at the girl critically, calling her in his own mind a bloodless, boneless, bodiless being, a bundle of nerves under a straw-coloured frizz. And he felt sorry for her and for the Sydney boy who travelled for the Sydney firm—sorrow which merged into a moment's rage at civilisation, with its preser-

vation of the unfit. "Poor Miss Bishop!" he repeated. "And I am aiding and abetting you in tea-drinking, which I am sure is bad for you."

"My word! It's better than soft drinks; you do get so sick of them, and they upset yer so; and what is there left? It's no use *your* advisin' *me* to tyke to sperits. I wouldn't, not if it was ever so. I see enough of that with men, let alone women, which is a fat lot worse. When they hoffer me, I generally says tea—it's the best, after all."

"An iced lemon-squash, through a straw, is very safe and very good," Hazell suggested.

"Now, I arsk yer," returned Miss Bishop, ready with her scorn for the creature man—"really, I arsk yer: *ice*, this sort o' heat, and Menheniot and lemons! 'Tain't often we get them up 'ere."

"Ale would be good for your nerves—a couple of glasses a day as a prescription."

"Oh, *ale*. If you knew as much about ale as I do ——"

"Australian faith in tea is not to be shaken. Well, well! Do you, by chance, ever see a fellow called Rennard about here?"

"That beauty? Is *that* yer man? Oh yes; I see him fast enough—hear him, too, worse luck! Doesn't bring much to the house but low talk; and I can't abide bad language, as I told yer. Anythink mikes him drunk."

"Where does he come from?"

"Oh, *I* don't know, and I don't believe any one else knows, either. I don't believe he knows himself. Got a humpy in the Bush somewhere, I sup-

pose. Comes to Paddy's Market sometimes, he does. Says he comes from England. Pity they didn't *kype* him there when they'd got him, *I* say. Oh, I don't have much opinion of the superior animal, I can assure you."

"So it appears. Well, Miss Bishop, between you and me, I don't know that I have, either. You couldn't hazard a guess if Rennard will come in to-day?"

"No, I couldn't. I haven't seen him. I don't keep a fond look-out for his sort. Is *he* yer man?"

"He's my man, for the moment."

"Something to his advantage—p'raps not?"

"Not—decidedly not."

"In the police?" inquired Miss Bishop, with a keen eye on Hazell's imposing figure, which interested her.

"In sheep," he answered, smiling, and wondered how he could pass away a little more time waiting.

It occurred to him to ask for a clean, quiet bedroom, where he might take his nap, trusting to her kindness to call him if the vagabond of his search should visit the hotel.

She led the way to a tolerable upper chamber, and withdrew to the shrill refrain, "Where is my wandering boy to-night?"

"To such base uses even a hymn may come," thought Hazell; and then the sorrowful egoism that embittered his days rushed upon him again. "There isn't a woman in the world, I suppose, who thinks of me as her wandering boy, and—well, I suppose

I am too old to care for the tenderness of a Miss Bishop!"

Flies buzzed continuously. The untiring voice of the auctioneer below inquired still, "Are ye don-ne?" and the various live-stock made their presence known each in idiom. Hazell put the pillow to the foot of the bed, and lay down with the top of his head toward the window. He spread a handkerchief over his face, tucked his hands up his sleeves, refused to think of Avis, asked himself what he lived for, and fell asleep instantly.

He awoke to a smart rapping on his door.

"He's 'ere, if yer want him," cried the high tones of Miss Bishop; "and I haven't any time to waste, for the bar's full!"

Daylight was failing. All times in the Bush are times for tea; but tea-time in chief was at hand, and half a dozen customers were seeking from the Bushman's Arms the refreshment of tough chops and tasteless eggs and inferior bread, and a boiling solution of tea—a barbarous food, cooked without judgment, taken without enthusiasm. Hazell thought of all the conspicuously *worst* meals he had ever made, and hesitated for a minute between the recollection of a supper shared with Greek shepherds, a supper of sour bread, hard goat's-milk cheese and resinated wine, and the anticipation of the fare of the Bushman's Arms this sultry evening. It was only for a moment. As he went downstairs and smelt the frying meat, he gave the palm of demerit to the Bushman's Arms. Some laughter, of the quality known as horse-laughter,

invited him to the part of the house where a couple of fellows were hoisting a tipsy stock-rider into the sorry saddle of a shabby steed. The intended rider was unable to give them any assistance, and was unwilling indeed to do anything but hinder them.

"Lemme go—yer all!" he screamed, with an ineffectual feint at the publican, a stout man who looked on with an indifferent smile. "He owesh me money! A quid I give 'im—down't tell me! Drunk a quid! Lemme go—yer all!"

"You've got all you'll carry, my wanderin' boy," remarked a bystander; "and if your animal tykes you safe to-night, he'll owe yer nothing, and matters 'll be square all around. How's that, boss?"

The publican laughed.

"Dick Hurly doesn't get another drop this side o' next time," he answered. "'Alf a pint more, and the load 'ud be more than any high-bred animal 'ud carry. He's jest on the turn o' the scale; I can see it with my eye."

It was not much that Dick Hurly saw with his eye, of which the appearance was glassy. He was a sinner past middle age, and presumably past reform. He wore a long greyish beard, and his clothes were well advanced in neglect.

"Lemme go!" he shrieked hoarsely; and as his grooms propped him in the saddle, he lurched to either side.

"Give 'im a start!" cried a squeaking voice from the window of the bar. "He'll be all right once he gets started."

This seemed to be accepted as a fact, though an

unaccustomed person, seeing the performance for the first time, would have named it offhand manslaughter. A handy whip of raw hide was applied smartly to the back parts of the horse, and feeling the instant motion, the knees of the drunken rider gripped the leather with the force of old habit, and off he went homewards. His reins hung loose, and his head rolled from side to side, as his body lurched more slowly, also from side to side, alarming to behold; but the trained knees did their work. The horse knew his way and the ways of his master, and bore him along at a free canter into the solitudes of the Bush.

"Happy man, Dick Hurly! He will awake tomorrow to find himself by his own fireside. Nearest thing I know of to a wishing-carpet. Interesting—characteristic!" said a stranger at Hazell's elbow.

He turned to find himself addressed by a thin personage whose yellow face was not much different in tone from the suit of tusseh-silk with which he veiled his emaciated body and indicated himself a seasoned dweller in hot climates.

A bell rang clangorous.

"My repast," said the stranger; "is it also yours?"

Hazell's heart warmed to a prospective companion, and they went in together. Rennard was not in the low-pitched, dingy room which offered them "tea." Three or four rough men sat silently at a long table spread with a soiled cloth, and presenting a group of eggs in cups, a couple of

saucers of jam, black with flies, a large dish of chops, a pile of thin slices of greyish bread. Hazell took a seat, pulled his beard, and sighed. The stranger in yellow silk answered the sigh.

"No one can say the Australians live to eat."

"But they must have a very strong desire to live," answered Hazell, smiling.

"A good sign," was the reply; "and, for that matter, I believe the lower orders of a nation are always about a century behind the upper classes in their diet."

"Only a century! How many eggs should a man consume who has taken little since breakfast and hopes to ride about five-and-twenty miles before midnight—four?"

"'An apple, an egg and a nut,'" quoted the stranger, "well, if he isn't a liver-man and calls this his dinner."

"Poor fool! he does so."

"Then he may have half a dozen."

Miss Bishop waited on the company. She came behind Hazell and whispered:

"Here's yer tea; I made it on purpose, jest the syme."

He pressed the rough, skinny little hand which gave him the cup with a smile of genuine gratitude. She passed on with a relenting toss to the yellow man, saying:

"Doctor, I put yer sugar in as usual—five lumps."

He nodded, and took his measure of fluid and explained to Hazell:

"I've all kinds of vices. I consume at intervals

every known narcotic. I hate the sight of my fellow-creatures—whom, being as you heard just now, in physic, I see ever at their least pleasing—yet I retain ineradicably one amiable failing—a love of sugar.”

“Alas! I have lost it. But I’ve heard that it is a natural craving in a hot climate.”

“One hears—one hears—one is always hearing! Hot climates—sugar may be the food of hell, as music is of heaven! yet more likely there will be none there, not a grain, only the well-developed craving for it.”

“You’ve a pretty wit of your own,” said Hazell, eating his eggs one after the other without even a pretence upon the greyish bread. In an ordinary way he would have been keen to talk to his sardonical companion, but this evening he was bent on an important quest. He beckoned Miss Bishop to his side, and, asking for more tea, asked also where Rennard was.

“In the bar. Didn’t yer see him? Oh, well, he’s syfe enough till closin’ time. When he does come in, he don’t go till he’s obliged. You needn’t hurry yerself.”

“Doctor,” said Hazell suddenly, “did you ever know of a man’s hand being incapacitated by Bathurst burrs?”

“Oh, yes, certainly—seen several cases of it, one only lately. There is not such a plague of burrs about here as in some parts, so you don’t, luckily for you, hear so much of their ingenious devilry. (I say you—I don’t know anything about you, sir, of

course.) No doubt whatever the devil reigns in Australasia—has always reigned. British colonists ousted him a bit, and he takes all kinds of ways of tormenting them before their time. Bathurst burrs distinctly one way ——”

“I did that man one injustice, why not another?”

The words seemed to ring in Hazell's ears as though they had been spoken. They clashed through his brain as though the drums and cymbals had clashed unexpectedly in an orchestra. His heart stood still a minute; perspiration poured down his face. He got up abruptly, murmuring “Heat,” and went out into the street to be alone, to steady himself.

If there were really some terrible thing behind her—Avis—some unspeakable thing! In such case, what right had he to interfere, to come here after this brute who brayed it forth? He was not her husband, sworn to fight her battles. He was no busybody, to stir mud, to make mischief; he was no Quixote, to espouse the cause of ladies in general. Should he go back and leave it untouched—back to that darkness, to that life which was no life? He leaned on a paddock fence, gazing unseeing into a dim field, bareheaded, a big white figure under the starlight, and thought and thought and thought. No! he could not go back thus. He loved her so. A spasm of pain seemed to contract his heart, and his face worked in the kindly darkness. His eyelids felt hot, as though tears were coming. He stretched out his arms along the fence, and bowed his head, and the long line of dry wood cracked and

shook in his grasp. "No evil that any mortal could do should keep me from her!" he said in himself. "If she had blood on her soul, I should love her!"

From this stage it was no far cry to a final wherein he decided that it was for him, of all the world, secretly or openly to do her service. It was inconceivable that she could wish a wretch like Rennard to chatter of her concerns, good or evil; therefore he should be silenced. Truly or falsely, he should talk no more. Hazell himself would ask nothing either way; from herself only would he hear anything about herself, but Rennard, if necessary by a wrung neck, should be bound over to keep the peace.

With this resolution he went back to the inn and the bar once more, not in vain. The miserable little figure of Rennard, distinctly more miserable-looking than when he had seen him last, sat in a corner, with shut eyes, sucking a glass of beer on a small table before him. Hazell, stalwart and commanding, stepped up to him and rapped the table sharply, his ringed finger sounding to attract attention.

"Luke Rennard!" he said sternly.

The man started and looked at him with blinking eyes, frightened, cowering instantly, as though with a habit of fear; then, recognising, he stammered:

"What cher want with me, Mister Hazell, please?"

The squatter wondered, looking on so poor a rag of manhood, what he did want with him. There was no obvious connection between Avis Fletcher,

without spot or blemish, and this dirty, quailing vagabond, peering with cunning little eyes from a blotched and pallid face. The whole physical scale of humanity lay between them. The name of the one should not be mentioned to the other, nor here, ever, in such a place as this. While he hesitated the man broke into a resentful moan:

"If it's my pore 'ands agen, they've never recovered from them burrs, and not a stroke of work 'ave I done these months past. Stiff with 'em, I am, and a sort o' dead feelin' all up my pore arms. Gawd's treuth it is! Sometimes it's as much as I kin do to get my boots on. P'raps it'd be a kind hact if you'd give me that letter you spoke of to a 'orspital, sir?"

Wanted in England! If England got him, she would not, indeed, get much. Oh, magnificent fiction of the law, that all men are equal! Equally responsible; effectual for good or evil; worthy of extradition action; educable—citizens! Yet the tubercle bacillus may slay the son of Anak, and the son of Anak would do well to put his heel on the tubercle bacillus. Should Hazell slay here? should he not? At the counter behind, the smooth tones of the strange doctor asked for a match for his cigar.

"Doctor," said Hazell suddenly, "here's a patient who says he has burred hands. Will you look at him a minute, to oblige me?"

"Will you be answerable for my five shillings?" returned the physician sardonically, and puffed and inhaled his potent Trichinopoly leaf. "Rooney

and Australians at the bar, I call you to witness that this big gentleman in white duck owes me five shillings ! ”

The speaker came forward and took in his own Rennard's unsightly fingers. He looked at them carelessly, smoking slowly ; then more carefully ; then laid down the cigar and stared keenly into the rogue's face ; then, brisk, energetic, interested, said :

“ There will be a light in the coffee-room, let us go there ; ” and half urging, half supporting the patient he led the way, followed, according to a gesture, by Hazell. Rennard answered a few questions and submitted his arms and features to close inquisition. Setting down the lamp, the doctor dismissed him.

“ Go and get yourself a whisky-and-soda, and tell Rooney to charge it to Dr. Beeby.”

He shrugged his shoulders and took up his cigar.

“ Well,” said Hazell, “ burrs there ? ”

“ Burrs ? Oh, very likely—burrs and blains of several kinds. That, sir—and I forgive you my five shillings for the scientific surprise of it—is a well-marked instance of one of our pathological mysteries. I've met with it before in China and Singapore and the South Sea Islands, but never yet on British soil, though it is found, not very rarely, in this country. We must shut him up, poor devil—*lepra maculo-anæsthetica*.”

“ Please explain.”

“ I beg your pardon. The man's a leper.”

Hazell's pale eyes were lit with horror.

CHAPTER XVII

ONE afternoon in the month Mrs. Wenban devoted nominally to the reception of her friends. She was socially "at home." In fact, she was more often to be found in her own house on any other day, for her life was so full of deeds of kindness that a free space was run in her engagement-book, and when found, as certainly once a month, she would hail it joyously and go forth to do something interesting, unconscious, till she returned to find reproachful pasteboard, of the polite awfulness of her act. Thus it was a day or two after her dinner-party. A drawing-room missionary meeting at Government House, conducted by the Bishop of Nigronesia, attracted her strongly. The sickly northeast wind blew heavily, exhausting enough, in Mrs. Bolitho's speech, to take the spring out of a flea; but missionary enterprise was dear to Mrs. Wenban: she went forth to be melted and to hear spiritual statistics. It was Mrs. Bolitho who remained on guard, sitting in a bamboo chair in the darkened library in a draught in a garment of gauze, as she told Avis, who sauntered in about tea-time with a complicated expression of countenance. The young lady smiled vaguely, and proceeded to speak upon her own point of view:

"What a bore it is, aunty, that things occur—

take place—happen—come to a crisis! Wamagatta is the best—nothing much happens there. Let us go back to it.”

“Verily I was contemplating it, my dear. I am longing for a sight of my old Spencer; but may I ask what in particular has, in journalese, eventuated?”

“I have just refused to become Mrs. Robert Wenban.”

Mrs. Bolitho considered a moment. “I wonder if that was wise of you, my dear.”

“I wonder myself, aunty. Marriage, you know, is the proper calling of woman, and I am hardly likely to get a better billet in the matrimonial world.”

“A refined and affectionate man, who may make a name for himself in science,” said Mrs. Bolitho.

“Plenty of money, too,” said Avis.

“And such a lovable mother-in-law! One in a million!” said Mrs. Bolitho.

“And such a reverential and measureless devotion for myself as, upon my word, made me feel ashamed.”

“Oh Avis!”

“Oh yes, aunty, I know. I may be sorry for it some day, but it was of no use. He begged me to take time to consider. I did take time—five minutes. I went to the heart of the matter. I tried to imagine him kissing me; and then something uprose in me and hit him—mentally, of course. It was of no use. I said to him: ‘I like you immensely—I am fond of you, indeed; I could live in

the house with you for ever, but I couldn't possibly be your wife.' ”

“And then, of course, he said what I am going to say—that the other thing would come.”

“Yes, but it wouldn't. I know myself. When I am good, I am a lamb, and when I am not good, as they say in the nursery, I am a perfect Turk. I put it to him that I couldn't embitter his life and his mother's declining years by bringing myself, a ramping and a roaring Turk, into their inmost bosom. And the dear man is about broken-hearted. What a contrarious world it is! I thought I should enjoy breaking male hearts; I don't at all. So please let us go back to Wamagatta, where there are none to break.”

A servant announced Miss Wavertree.

A few minutes were spent in explanation. There was the necessary setting forth of Mrs. Wenban's absorbing regard for missions; there was the announcement of the visitor's intended departure for a cooler altitude, by reason of which, with reference to her recent repast, she had to call at once or never.

A happy thought occurred to Mrs. Bolitho—to secure a companion for Avis in case of her return to the uneventful loneliness of Wamagatta.

“Will you not come to me, my dear, a little later?” she invited, in her most cordial manner. “We are hot, of course, in my part of the colony, but we are dry, which is what you want after Sydney, and all the colony is hot in the summer, except the mountains, where you may have weeks of driz-

zle. My house is really comfortable; not the case with Bush houses in general, and we would do our best to amuse you. I feel that you two girls should have much in common, and ought to be better acquainted." She included both in a genial glance.

Miss Wavertree hesitated. Her courtesy was severely taxed. It had been her hope that she would not meet Miss Fletcher when she called. She was greatly attracted by Mrs. Bolitho, as the correct and high-minded of her sex are invariably attracted by a charming elderly woman whose position and repute make her entirely "safe." One knows so exactly where one is with a discreet matron whose present vouches for her past, whose age vouches for her future. Miss Wavertree felt that she could be quite devoted to Mrs. Bolitho, and, further, she had a great wish to see something of Bush ways comfortably. The invitation tempted her, but, like the correct and high-minded of her sex in general, she had a horror of any female of her class who was not quite *nice*—*quite* nice. It was improbable that she would have found herself in the same house with Miss Fletcher in England. She was sure she would never have been expected to make of her a personal friend in England. Helen Wavertree was nothing if not strict in her principles. She could not relax them because she happened to be in New South Wales; there was far too much of that kind of relaxation, she had heard.

She coloured slightly, and looked distressed.

"I should like it of all things, dear Mrs. Bolitho, thank you," she said; "but I have arranged to stay

at Banal with Mrs. Lefanu, who has taken a cottage there. And then there's papa, who is on guard, poor thing, and cannot get away from his ship. I don't like to be too far from him."

She did not glance at Avis, who watched her, hard as carven wood.

Mrs. Bolitho persisted. She understood it all, but she persisted.

"Later on, then," she said. "We expect Mrs. Bengough any time next year. You know her. You must come to us when she is at Wamagatta."

"I should love to meet dear Mrs. Bengough," said Miss Wavertree impressively; "I have such an admiration for her. She is so good, and so exceedingly good to look at."

"Aunty," said Avis, getting up from her seat, "I can't have this. My mother wants no one but me when she comes this side of the world; or if she does, I can't share her with any one so absorbing as Miss Wavertree."

There was a pause. The visitor's pretty cheek was rosy. Had her tenderness been less engaged, Mrs. Bolitho's natural malice would have enjoyed a so well-bred perplexity. Avis, whose complexion never betrayed her, maintained an advantage and pressed the attack. She continued:

"I am sure Miss Wavertree will understand, among all the rest of the virtues, family affection."

Without haste or awkwardness, civilly yielding the visitor to whom the visitor was due, the heroine of this tale disappeared through open Indian curtains which hid a room beyond.

Miss Wavertree struggled for self-possession, but she was plainly disturbed, distressed; she knew herself right, but she would rather for the moment have been wrong. She watched the curtains wave an emptiness; she listened to the soft retreating steps, and spoke genuinely, nervously in apology:

"I never saw any one walk so well."

Mrs. Bolitho replied seriously: "I assure you her soul is as noble as her body."

Miss Wavertree looked perplexed. Words rose to her lip; doubts checked them there. Could rumour be altogether wrong? Was this clever old lady deceived? why this unending separation from an adored mother? Impulsive by nature, question rushed to the brink; training held it there. In a long minute of silence her face showed half a dozen states of mind. Finally the most stable of them found utterance:

"I should so like to like her," she murmured.

The whole mental action was clear to the shrewd mother-wit before which it was deployed, and the character of the player was equally evident to one who had a fine intuition about her fellow-creatures. She resolved on a crucial blow.

"Miss Wavertree," she began, "I am going to pay you a very high compliment, to take you into my confidence. But first—you see, I am lame—please ring the bell for me. Thanks. And now look through those curtains and make sure that Avis is nowhere behind them."

The answering servant was told, in case of further callers, that Mrs. Wenban was out and Mrs.

Bolitho engaged, and the two ladies settled themselves for undisturbed statement. The elder had made up her mind, and when she made up her mind she acted accordingly ; it was her rule, the habit of her life. Yet here for a moment she faltered ; she felt as though she were about to give away, on her own responsibility, something that was not hers—a most jealously guarded something. Surely silence was still the only policy for Avis and those who loved her. Yet there is a time to speak, and there are men and women to whom it is meet and right to speak. The airy frivolity of summer bonnet and frock, the expensive frothiness of modish clothing, the candour of the intelligent face, of English bloom and pinkness, the pleasant, ingenuous hazel eyes fixed tentatively on her, contrasted reassuringly. Now was the moment to make a friend for Avis on both sides of the sea.

“Is your chair so comfortable that you can give me your whole attention ? If not, change it. I make no stranger of you. Young people are no strangers to me. I have had three young men of my own, and two daughters-in-law, and one daughter of my heart, Avis Fletcher. But I am going to speak to you as one gentlewoman to another. That, Miss Wavertree, is the preëminent advantage of gentle birth ; it is a common ground of mutual understanding on which those who meet for the first time—who never meet at all—can treat each other with entire ease and satisfaction. My discursive tongue ! They say one has the age of one’s heart, if it were that of one’s tongue ! Well,

youth is excellent, but age has its compensations. Youth ought to be silent in the judgment-hall; age ought to speak. I take upon myself now to bring my adopted niece before the bar, and have her tried by her peer. There are one or two men who would say she was peerless. I don't submit her to their judgment, but to yours."

"Do you think I can properly judge?"

Miss Wavertree was half afraid of the demand that might be made of her.

"Who better? I take it you are much of an age (Avis is five-and-twenty). You were born of the same soil, the same social class, in the same surroundings; your people know each other. Your early trainings must have been identical, precept for precept: to take your morning bath; to be true and just in all your dealings; to maintain a decent reserve, even in your bedchamber. You smile at my leap-frog style of talk. I cover a great deal of ground by it, and mean no disrespect to my subject. So far, then, you might be sisters, but you are not. Avis Fletcher had—has—a mother who is all a mother should be; you ——"

Mrs. Bolitho paused. Helen Wavertree answered her as was expected:

"I cannot remember my mother at all, but I have a father who is the most lovable of men."

"So I should suppose—just that beautiful quality, lovable! Well, Avis Fletcher had a father who was a curse to every life that came near his own. In whatever household he had lived, it would have been an unhappy one. Oh, the fiction that 'homes are

happy'! In my experience, every second household is torn and embittered by the sheer bad temper of some member or members of it. No place like home! Half the population of the British Empire is thanking Heaven that there isn't! I speak only for the British. I think our tempers are worse than most. I believe the temper of the Rev. Markham Fletcher—you knew his name and I dare say his fame—to have been one of the worst imaginable. He was carping, spiteful, ungenial, suspicious, and, moreover, at times insanely violent."

"I have heard of his violence," said Miss Wavertree. "Report said all sorts of dreadful things—that his fits of passion grew upon him till he died in one; broke a bloodvessel, and died of rage at meeting his wife unexpectedly in a field. She had left him some time before."

"I believe that to be quite true. I believe her life was a long martyrdom. I have been told that he was remarkably handsome, with that particularly suave and deferential public manner which is frequently the other side of a private manner which would disgrace a hog! I have often noticed it. The girl married him, I suppose, in an access of girlish priggishness, and repented it ever after. I believe him to have been also what is called a bad man. This of itself would have been terrible enough to the bride, who thought, no doubt, that she had wedded the Church Incarnate; but it was his uncontrollable and unappeasable humours that made Coleswick Vicarage hateful and dangerous for his child. If I had any choice between a sweet-

tempered felon (undiscovered !) and an ill-tempered righteous, I would take the first ; yes, my dear, and so would any woman of experience ! When we all come to answer for our sins, we British, you will see that those for which we get the blackest marks will not be drunkenness, nor hypocrisy, nor graspingness—of which foreigners, in their little unprejudiced way, accuse us so persistently—but our domestic bad temper will be judged to have caused the greatest amount of unhappiness, and ruined the highest number of fellow-creatures' lives. Well, this is a hobby of mine ; my Spencer was always one of the most amenable of born beings. 'I will not know a wicked person,' said David—foolish, hasty fellow ! I will not know, if I can help it, an ill-tempered one ! Life is not long enough. Pardon again for my discursiveness ; women of the old school were never trained to keep to the point. I imagine the child's house—a parson's house, moreover, with the brute never *certainly* off the premises except on Sundays ! And recollect that she is his child as well as her mother's. Recent physiology states, I read, that we are a quarter father and a quarter mother, and an eighth of each grandparent. Avis, then, was a quarter and an eighth (old Major Fletcher was notorious) of imperiousness, violence, vengeance, gall ! And the days were dull and the winters were dark. She was an only child. No stranger was allowed inside the door. No noise, no piano, no laughter suffered on the premises. Picture it ! I dare say, at seventeen, you were spending your winters in Italy, and your

springs in London. Avis was almost always at Coleswick. The excellent uncle, Mr. Wilbraham of Wilswick—yes, of course, you know him—was nothing if not an English squire—squire-parson. Neither London nor Rome attracted him from his beer and his beeves and his rulings as rural dean. Country vicars, of course, cannot leave their work ; and had Mr. Fletcher had the wealth, he would not have had the will to give his irreconcilable daughter change of scene and fresh companionship. The mother did what she could ; her love could soothe, but nothing could make here a happy home for a passionate, excitable girl. And then a flattering yeoman youth fell in love with the girl's beauty and vitality, and cast great eyes at her. Her father, hearing of it, forbade her to speak to him—forbade, of course, with many imperious additions ; and she, having known the youth from her childhood, and being, moreover, as I tell you, a good part Markham Fletcher in the matter of naughtiness, disobeyed, and entered on a course of deceit that has all but destroyed her whole life. Remember, she was yet a child, in the seething stage. When one does not go, one is borne ; standing with expectant feet—not reluctant, most expectant—on the threshold of womanhood. The whole thing, I am convinced, was chiefly bravado. The fellow wasn't her equal (a fine figure enough !) ; and she used to meet him at Wilswick in the empty Rectory, which her uncle, you know, being squire, occupied no longer. Falsehood grew apace—mischief likewise. I believe the unhappy child was miserable indeed before

the end. You will say, What was her mother doing all this time? I can answer that: she was attending to her duty as a Vicar's wife in the house and the village; and you must understand, I must impress upon you, that her position was most difficult. The father maddened his child—roused all that was worst in her. I have heard of the meanest cruelties: how he killed her cat and sold her horse, and she hated him. Scenes were frequent; they never met without disagreement. The child's nature must suffer. It was best they should be apart as much as possible, and Avis was the spoiled darling of Wilswick Manor. Her continual absences were attributed to visits there. Certainly she always went in that direction. And more: have you never noticed, perhaps in yourself, that at a certain age both boys and girls are apt to become estranged from their family—hostile, unmanageable? No one can control them; no one of their closest relatives. They are Ishmaels from the circle. It is only a phase, but they should spend it among strangers. I believe it is part of the demand of each young life for a way of its own. I delay unwarrantably, Miss Wavertree; but I have put my prisoner before the bar without her knowledge or consent, and I must state her case as fully and as fairly as possible. I see you are trying to follow me. Your face tells me you are true-hearted and straight. Well, my dear—my dear—the end came. The yeoman, Joe, broke his neck hunting or somehow, and Avis fell insensible when she heard of it. Poor Avis! I heard the tale with tears, and

I tell it again with tears. Miss Wavertree—so young; I believe, from my soul, so unfairly taken advantage of! Think of yourself at seventeen! The wild thing that I was then! Her father drove her out of the house within the hour. I cannot dwell on this part of it; you can fill in the details for yourself. God judges him. Her mother followed her, of course, and nursed her, and held her back to life; and the county rang with it—the country, to some extent, rang with it. The Southamptonshire Wilbrahams and the Fletchers of Fletcherstown! Such a scandal! You know the rest, and can guess what you don't know. There was no forgiveness possible for Avis in England; but she has found life possible, I am glad to think, in a new country—my own country. Yes, my dear—yes, yes! But one does rather enjoy a weep, you know; after all, it is a great luxury, when not of the hopeless sort. Nothing hopeless about Avis Fletcher herself! The only hopeless thing is this malice and empty venom of the gossip, and the unquenchable love of the vulgar, of the masses, for what is evil and of bad report, and their joy in the pillorying of any human being of whatever kind.”

Helen Wavertree was not of the melting sort; but she was holding a hand of Mrs. Bolitho's with one of her own, while with the other she addressed her handkerchief to her tears.

“Do you think Avis would be friends with me?” she whispered. “It is nothing to be one of the just persons who have never needed repentance.”

CHAPTER XVIII

“EXPECT us Saturday.—LUCIA BENGOUGH,
R.M.S. *Senegambia*, Albany.”

Thus ran the telegram received by Avis the following morning. Mrs. Bolitho's responsibility was over. Her scheme had answered, and her letter of demand had brought the mother forthwith across the world, and however the crisis should turn, it would lack nothing of skilful treatment. Avis was transformed with happiness. She forgot the *Live Un* and the world's malice; she forgave Miss Wavertree, who came, humble and discreet, and intrigued for friendship; she was so tender to Robert Wenban, that his sore heart conceived a shred of hope; she put away for the first time with some success the thought of Ralph Hazell. At last she was to have at hand, in close intimacy, one to whom she really belonged, who knew all and loved, as a matter of course. In the few days of eager waiting she realised as never before the sweetness, the value of the family tie, the comfort of its *matter-of-courseness*. To be wayward, to have sinned, to be creditable, to be glorious, to be loved none the less, none the more, for either, but because one *belongs*; to be loved as a right without need for gratitude or effort; to be understood without explanation, or taken for granted, restfully, without

being understood—this is the only satisfactory background from which to contest the battle of life. It is the universal need, and he has a fair quarrel with fate who goes without it.

The Melbourne express brought Avis her dear belongings, a party of four, of whom at first she recognised but one, and acknowledged only two. A glimpse into a window of the train, and she sprang into the corridor and a compartment off it, where her mother's arms awaited her. No words, properly so-called, passed between them; there were little sounds of full meaning; there was an impatient discord of an interfering hat, and a golden head snuggled into a cordial circle of arm and shoulder, and one heart was safe in the eternal shelter, and one was warm with the eternal sacrifice.

The man in attendance waited patiently. He was a little dry man, past middle age, of a youthful spareness of figure, whose head was thick with fair curly hair, scarcely touched yet by the frost of time, which had lined his face, clean-shaven. His wife had done wrong, in his eyes, once only during their lifelong knowledge of each other—when in her "access of girlish priggishness" she had married the Reverend Markham Fletcher. The one wrong having been amply rectified, now six years, all else was right, and he maintained toward her an attitude of attention, silent and satisfied. He handed their smaller baggage through the window to a porter, and continued to wait sympathetically. No mortal could pass in the space of a railway car-

riage two such Homerically-moulded ladies, but Sydney was the terminus; there was no reason for hurry. He sat in a corner and kneaded his grey travelling-hat. Presently Avis raised her head and looked into her mother's benign face.

"Oh, how *beautiful* you are!" she cried.

Benignity was moved to laughter. The daughter was pushed away a little, as limits allowed, and answer was returned:

"But, my darling, you are magnificent!"

Mr. Bengough, in his soul, agreed with both, and permitted another closure with the utmost amiability. Prudence, however, had her rights.

"How do you do, Avis?" he interposed dryly. "The authorities will want to swab down the rolling-stock in a minute."

His stepdaughter gave him her hand indifferently. By degrees they reached the corridor, where a spotless nurse stood bearing a spotless bundle.

"Darling," said Mrs. Bengough, in her soft tones, Irish, like her colouring, "I must introduce you to your brother."

It awoke Avis from her emotional ecstasy. She had known, of course, that there was a brother, born to the great surprise of all whom it concerned, and the great content of his parents—the crown, as they said, of their old age—but she had realised it very little. In her own mind she was still her mother's only child, and she felt no throb of kinship, only a mild impatience at the presence of the paltry unknown, who meant nothing to any one at such a time as this.

"Thomas Edward," said Mrs. Bengough, and the nurse presented a healthy little round of flesh, of which the lineaments were composed in sleep.

"Oh, I remember," said his sister. "Thomas after Uncle Tom, and Edward after you, step-father."

"The hose is really coming," observed Mr. Bengough, and the ladies really moved out and walked along the platform before him. The crowd had cleared away, and he had a full view of them—of his own Juno and Hazell's Diana. In height and scale they differed little; in complexion, in feature, and expression very much. Juno's hair, always abundant, once blue-black, was now iron-grey; her features were the heavier and more generous, and mellowed by experience into an exceptional dignity and mildness, in contrast with which he noted the eagerness, the essential pride of the younger traits, more strictly aristocratically handsome; but in each alike, allowing for the variance of years, the colouring was rich, blooming in the fine cheek of the one and the lips of the other.

They went together to a hotel, where Mrs. Bolitho awaited them with unstinted welcome. Mrs. Bengough pressed her hands and looked at Avis, and pressed them again, saying, in an unsteady voice:

"If there is any peculiar quality in a mother's gratitude, a mother's blessing!"

The sea of feeling was in springtide that day.

But a private explanation was necessary, and must be made quickly, as Spencer Bolitho's desert-

ing wife had a purpose of immediate return to her conjugal duties. Without set statement, by a marvellous mutual understanding, Avis's guardian women manœuvred that they should be left alone together; and it seemed good to Mr. Bengough, after long weeks of the confinement of travel, to move about. Avis, also, though reluctantly, thought it best herself to fetch her properties from Gaza, and the pair departed in a cab. The confederates turned to each other instantly.

"Tell me, why did you send for me?" said the mother.

"She was breaking her heart for a man she had refused, for no reason that I know of, after having apparently made up her mind to accept him with every sign of joy. If ever I saw two people in love; I saw them then—Avis and Ralph Hazell."

"Ralph Hazell! She wrote of him to me, asking about his former life—a splendid story. Oh, I am so thankful! Is he the man who is to make my child's happiness? Oh, I am so thankful!"

"A splendid story, is it? Well, I felt it was. Not often am I deceived in my judgment of character. I knew there must be a story, and I was sure it would do him honour. I liked him the moment I saw him."

"I must thank you for this too, then." Mrs. Bengough's glance glistened.

"Not yet, my dear—not yet! I am sorry to say many times lately I have felt that the last state of her might be worse than the first. You know her enthusiastic nature—not that she confided in me, of

course, directly, but I did not need words; she was as deep in despair as in love. The man was clean gone, retired to his station like a wounded animal to its hole, whence no female, of course, could decently try to lure him. You don't know the meanness to which she reduced me. I had to get her attention away from herself, and herself away from Wamagatta. A twinge of my old foe, sciatica, gave me the idea how. I feigned a bad attack of it. I knew the horrible thing so well that there was no difficulty about it; and first I demanded nursing, and second her care here in Sydney, where I came to consult the profession."

"And the profession did not find you out?" asked Mrs. Bengough, smiling and wondering, being for her own part altogether incapable of such subtle audacity.

"The profession!" cried Mrs. Bolitho. "Their pigs are all in pokes! But if by any chance my poke had been found transparent, I should have changed my medical man."

"At least, let me pay his bill," protested Mrs. Bengough, laughing.

"*My* Avis is cheap at the price," replied the other wickedly. "She seems to you all right, then?"

"I see nothing wrong so far."

"She is much better, outwardly; but when the excitement of your coming has worn away——"

Their subject entered upon them as they spoke.

"Mamma," she said, "I sent Eddy Bengough for my trunks, after all. It wasn't in nature to leave

you when I have only just got you. Mrs. Wenban will be delighted to see Eddy Bengough, and if anything is forgotten, I can but fetch it."

Mrs. Bolitho saved her friend's countenance. "What a way to speak of your stepfather!"

"What in the world am I to call him? I never can decide. He used to be Cousin Eddy; then Uncle Eddy; he is always Eddy to everyone. It will not matter how old he grows or how many honours and acres he possesses, he makes no claim for awe. A middle-aged man should be bald, or baldish, or his hair, if thick, should be grey; then, as regards the figure of him, there are certain contours for maturity; but 'Edward Bengough, Esq., M.P., D.L., J.P., B.A., of Wilsdean Manor,' and fifty-two years of this world, doesn't carry a pound more, I should think, than he did at twenty-two, and very few hairs less, and these of a childishly light brown. Of course, every one knows him as Eddy. I dare say the baby will."

Mrs. Bengough yielded the point of her husband's appearance. She had served a long and most bitter apprenticeship to the arts that make for peace, and she never contested trifles. This, for other than a despot, is the prime condition of rule in the greater things of life.

During the fortnight which followed she had scope for her powers of combination and melioration. Avis, as we know, was her only daughter; Eddy had every moral, mental, social and legal right to her whole attention. Thomas Edward's claim might almost be called divine; it was neces-

sary to blend these diverse demands, focussing them in herself into a centre of home. It was possible, for each loved her, but perplexing, for each needed her, and that exclusively—a dilemma, though a flattering one. Mrs. Bengough had to allow that Avis for the moment came first, and she relied on the good training of Eddy to admit it without resentment; as for her enforced neglect of Thomas Edward, his mother had lived a full half-century in the world, and she had learnt some common-sense. Yet there were moments when she could have shed a self-reproachful tear at the thought of it. Eddy and Avis, however, were very happy out of doors on horseback, risking their necks by gallops through the deep scrub that covers the cliff and waste lands round Sydney. Such hours could be given unquestioned to the youngest born. In the elder born, watching her with regard to Mrs. Bolitho's report of her, she did remark a change, not satisfactory. Her moods were unequal, her words, without provoking cause, often hard; she was restless, yet refused any plan for the future. The happiness of their meeting was evidently not all-sufficing. Mrs. Bengough awaited a fit moment to introduce the name and story of Hazell, but for the first week it did not offer; it must be skilfully done, no creaking of machinery, no haste, no unsteadiness of voice, and there must be a clear space of time for it, of which circumstances did not at first allow.

One evening Miss Wavertree called, bringing her father, and stayed long, informal and very friendly, making it plain that, with Avis's goodwill, she

would like to come to close and lasting terms. Mrs. Bengough made an extra thanksgiving at the bedtime after that visit ; she recognised that South-amptonshire was once more possible for her exiled daughter. Impossible that Helen Wavertree had not heard the old story ; obvious that personal liking outweighed it. To all appearance the liking was in a fair way to be mutual, for our heroine lacked no sort of human capacity, and could appreciate all the better for long deprivation a comrade of her own sort and size. The young women discussed the cathedral town of Coleminster, its holes and corners, its chimes and canals, till Avis's speech failed her for homesickness, and the other broke the silence by exclaiming :

"But athletics are the fashion now at home ; not art in particular. Anybody can get a Murray and rave about styles of masonry. You must play golf before you come home. I don't say croquet."

"When you come to Wamagatta you must teach me," was the reply ; and all seemed smooth, worthy of a special thanksgiving.

There were other callers ; there was a dinner at the Wenbans', and a dinner of some fellow-passengers from the *Senegambia*, and a moonlight evening in a launch upon the harbour, and at last came an evening of enforced quiet. Eddy Bengough's youth was not wholly trustworthy, and his stepdaughter was an unsparing horsewoman ; he returned fairly knocked up from a rough ride, nearly forty miles long, which, for her, only quickened the pleasure of a hot bath. He betook himself to a long chair in

the verandah. They sat watching the street below, and the silvery gleam of harbour at the end of it, and talked peacefully, dropping lazy phrases among the softened cries of the city, the clang of tram-bells, the whistle and shriek of the traffic of the port. Their faces were indistinct to the other, the languor of the hot night was in the attitude of each.

"Wamagatta will brace you both up," said Avis. "It's a bleached desert this time of year, and I'm sure I don't know what on earth you are to do there, but you'll be away from these northeasters."

"By the way," said her mother softly, "you mentioned in one of your letters a newcomer who had taken a station near there—a Mr. Hazell. You fancied he had been a soldier; you asked if Philip Bengough knew anything about him."

One of the bamboo chairs creaked violently.

"Did I?" returned Avis abruptly.

"Philip had a great deal to say when I asked him. Mr. Hazell's name and doings seem well known in India, and to any one connected with the service in England. I was immensely interested. I should like to meet such a high-minded man." Mrs. Bengough turned to her husband, who was lying quite flat in his chair and smoking a cigar at the sky. "Eddy, you were much interested, too. You said you had read about it in the papers; tell us the story."

"Such a long story," said Eddy lazily.

"So well worth telling," said his wife. "Come, dear, you can do justice to a tale when you care for it."

“Oh, a very fine fellow, indeed,” said Eddy. “Phil got quite enthusiastic over him—seemed to think we ought to know all about it. I must say there are not too many men of his sort. Well, it’s a terribly long story. I shall cut it down as much as possible. Hazell, rich fellow, very keen soldier, Captain in the Fusilladers, most devoted to his wife—Miss Bettingham (Katie Bettingham, daughter of Bettingham of Jubbelpore), pretty little thing, most shocking flirt. Love-match on his part, money-match on hers. Hazell, a by-word for devotion to her, couldn’t see daylight where she was concerned. Flirted under his nose. He thought it all right: just lay down and let her walk over him. Talk of the whole province. Colonel’s wife did suggest something to him once—something mild about pretty girls and temptation; Hazell blazed at her till she shrivelled up and cried for mercy, and sent his wife home in the very same ship as the particular man about whom the good lady had warned him. Lots of men talked about it; they said she manœuvred to get sent home with this particular man, Major Corthorn, Fusilladers. Sick-leave, both of them, he and she. Hazell lived like a monk when she was gone—went nowhere, played polo, got up cricket among the men, studied Russian, went nowhere; Phil, quite eloquent about it all, said there never was such a sober grass-widower. It appears that Hazell had letters from his wife regularly—from Ilfracombe chiefly, where she was staying with her sister, she said, for the bracing air. Hazell got a sudden attack of fever rather worse

than usual, and all in a minute got leave himself, urged by fever and desire to see his wife; didn't cable—happy surprise for her—rushed off and took ship to join her. Not well on board, not well in Plymouth; stayed there two nights; wired to wife. First day better, rushed on to Ilfracombe. No wife there; no one there; no one been there for long time. Mrs. Hazell and her brother had been there; Indian letter every week, lately forwarded to Tenby and then to London; wire forwarded to London only day before; postal limits for forwarding almost reached. So much from the post office. Hazell followed on to London address, quiet hotel, South Kensington; no one there. Telegram received by Mrs. Hazell—yes—and left instantly; no address given: brother with her. Hazell, anxious, wired to his wife's home; answer, 'Not there.' He got alarmed. No suspicion yet of her true character, but suspicion growing when he found that her brother and sister were both at home with their parents, neither having stayed away anywhere with his wife. She had been 'with friends' at Ilfracombe. Nonplussed. Private detective; found at Brighton; Major Corthorn daily visitor, staying in nearest hotel. But found, she refused to meet her husband! No explanation was given; she simply refused to meet him. She did once vouchsafe to write that he knew why she refused, and would soon know that she knew also. Hazell almost mad; attacks of fever into the bargain; madder yet when the notice came of her intention to file a bill in divorce against himself on account of

some woman in Plymouth. Most audacious thing ever heard of—really the most audacious! Phil knows a man who was in Hazell's confidence at the time—says that never was any mortal so torn by rage, despair, incredulity, desire for revenge, futile longing for the woman he loved still; and very ill, too, with fever and sorrow mingled. Says that one night it took three of them to hold him, and he ought to have been in a strait-jacket. His policy, of course, as they all said, was a counter-charge; the proofs of her misdoing were as large as they well could be, but—a counter-charge—he wouldn't bring it. Would you believe it? He wouldn't bring it!" Eddy warmed with his subject, and sat up, addressing Avis vehemently. "The man wouldn't say a word, wouldn't answer to deny the most preposterous and abominable accusation ever made against a devoted husband—either too proud or too generous; said she might bring a charge of murder against him—personal cruelty was all one with it—she was his no longer. She had never existed as he knew her—she didn't exist! There was no action to meet. Then, again, he would say that he had loved her; that his name was still hers, and should not be dragged through the dirt by cross-examination; least said, soonest mended. If she wanted to be free, this was the best way for her freedom to come to her. A charge against a man who had already suffered the worst that could be suffered—a charge of any sort—could not touch him. Nothing moved him. Case came on—no defence—*decree nisi*—Major and Mrs. Corthorn.

They say Hazell would sit for hours staring before him, only shouting at intervals, 'How could she?' They thought his reason would go—thought he would go all to pieces; but strong man, pulled through—at great cost, though; gave up everything; sold out; passed his old friends in the streets—disappeared. Finally, I suppose, has begun life again this side of the world, and may better luck attend him. I should like to meet him. I hope things will make amends."

Eddy paused and lay down again.

"I hope so, too," said his wife earnestly.

Avis said nothing. She was able to keep silent; that was all her strength allowed, and it was all that her strength could do. The city below and the sky above were blotted out by the surge in her eyes, and in her ears the roaring pulse cut her off from the rest of the world. All was tumult.

CHAPTER XIX

THE hours of the night told themselves forth ruthlessly in the wakeful ears of Avis. Whether they came faster or more slowly, she could not decide; sometimes the interval between one quarter and another seemed but a few minutes; sometimes the chime so tarried to her listening that she felt she must have missed at least one striking of it. The trams ceased, the cabs ceased, the post office clock and the moon were left in possession of the city. All slept, it seemed to Avis, but herself and them. Partly she dozed herself, or, rather, lay between sleeping and waking, as they do whose fine habit of oblivion will not be wholly denied by even the most stirring emotion. But, keen or dull, every nerve of her dwelt on Hazell and his story. It drew her to him as his magnetism would have drawn her had he been there; the world held nothing but him. A sense of him permeated her as the ether permeates the earth, and pulsed through her with the universal pulsation. Memory, lately stifled, took its revenge, and she could have groaned aloud with the pain of longing. The tale of his wrong worked, fermented, in her brain. His pride had been as great as her own, his suffering equal, and the scandal which had goaded him to madness, and the despair to which he had all but succumbed, and the courage of his new start in life, commended him

to her, tied them in a bond of brotherhood that was almost more than loverhood. But his magnanimity, his nobleness, divided them for evermore. He had been blameless, devoted; he had accepted blame and a public record for broken faith. He had disdained vengeance when it lay, even according to law, under his hand. She looked into her own heart of the past, and saw there her own cries and yearnings for vengeance. She looked back to the beginning and saw her own temerity, selfishness. He was nobler than she; he was too noble for her. His wife must be a woman without blemish, on whom no shadow had fallen, whose uprightness was as his own, whose spirit was unclouded. It was well they had parted; yet, that it should have been for her to grieve him, to deny him, to turn his rising hopes to bitterness and darken his days once more! It would be so easy to sacrifice her own pride, she thought, swayed by opposing mental currents; so easy to forget her own prejudice and dignity; because he wanted her, to give herself up to make him happy. The sweetness of the imagination possessed her. She went to the table and sat down to write a word by which she bid him come—if he could; then she plunged into a sea of intoxicating fancy: no more struggle, nothing but satisfaction in his arms! Again temperament and training forbade the dream. It was not for her to bring him comfort. There must be no more disappointment for him. Found worthless, he had spoken of that other woman, Katie, as dead. If he knew her, Avis Fletcher, would he not also find her

worthless and look upon her as dead? But, without his full knowledge, she would never summon him, never accept him, never go to him. There should be no more deceit, no more terrible awakening; better for both a never realised joy. She could love him without sign, and die faithful, proud that he had ever loved her.

The moon sank, the warm dawn took possession of its due breadth of earth, the flagship gun boomed—the night was over.

Only one night! Mrs. Bengough saw its true duration in her daughter's face. Years were marked there when they met, and she saw their traces with dismay.

And all that storm had arisen from the hearing of a name! Were those the blue shades of pity or the lines of longing? How might both be banished? The mouth was frozen into hardness—her father's mouth at his most implacable. By fault of character or of circumstance, was there no noontide of gladness for her?

They spent a silent day. Eddy was the smallest of speakers, and had, besides, been advised in his bedchamber of the conditions round him. He rested, and left this matter, as most of others, to his wife and to time. Thomas Edward was fractious with the heat; his temperature was somewhat raised, and he kept his crib with cooling drinks. Avis was too weary to know if there was talk or not. "Let me not see the sun!" was in her mind, and she abode all the long summer day within doors in a darkened room. A complaint of heat, a

decent pretence of reading, enabled her to shut out the intolerable glare. The sun ruled the sky, ruled the city, hated and feared of all men. Lucia, too, resented his brilliancy, thought of persuading her dear one home to England, where there is green for tired eyes and soft misty airs for soothing. Nature should mourn with us when we weep; when we pipe to her, she will always dance.

Suggestions were made by one or other for an evening excursion, but all were half-hearted, made by each of the party in turn with reference to the other two, with a pious pretence about them; and evening found them again on the verandah out of their rooms, with the serene moonlight upon the movement of the street.

Avis drowsed in her chair—a whisper woke her. She saw her mother, sitting at Eddy's side, point with a finger of delight to something within, where the baby lay in his cot, and she presumed a glimpse of him in a peculiarly ravishing attitude. Eddy smiled, took possession of the finger and the hand belonging to it, and held them in fond tranquillity. The daughter awoke to her isolation—the woman to her desolation. She was not one—yet—to look on happiness through other eyes. She got up and went in.

Lucia sighed to her husband: "If only we English were not so reserved with each other!"

Eddy answered along his pipe: "Well, we are, and, personally, being English, I'm glad of it. Don't see how one could live in the house with people who gabbled about everything they felt."

"I think we should often suffer less if we could, or would, only speak."

"I think some of us would suffer a deuced lot more! Besides, my dearie, surely you know by this time that lots of things actually perish in silence, whereas they'd be green bay-trees if one talked about 'em."

"Always two sides to every question—my poor Avis!"

"Terrible business, these early love-stages," said Eddy. "Wonder why they couldn't have been arranged to get *here* straight away!" He stroked with his thumb the hand he held, and, looking into the room again, remarked contentedly: "Funny little pink paw of babsy's!"

They both gazed at the pink paw and beheld in it all loveliness.

Avis came back with a secular air, saying:

"We've had a nice lazy day! But I've put it out of our power to do such another to-morrow. I've just telephoned to Dr. Outram to take us all out to Parvapura hospital and show us over. He is to be here at half-past four with a victoria and two riding-horses. I shall ride both ways, and you, mamma, will drive. You, Mr. B., will ride one way and he the other, and you will drive the other way and he the one, as you please. You have full liberty of choice within these limits, and the elder lady of the party, who has no more love for the pigskin, will be properly attended. As for the younger lady, with any sort of a mount but a buck-jumper, she can attend to herself."

Parvapura lies some miles south of Sydney, on the ocean shore, in the wild moors that stretch very sombre, very solitary, swept by all the wild winds that swoop upon the land from the sea. The scrub-grown soil reaches its arms of low cliffs round a beautiful blue semicircle of waters, which bear into them from the east, and neither hill nor tree prevents its endless bath of air and sunshine. A small jetty accommodates the resident officer's boat; a tiny, narrow, white road lengthens out, miles long, toward the city. Otherwise Parvapura lies alone—a hospital, and nothing more; cut off deliberately from human society, a spot appointed for the warfare of man with microbe. The white buildings of it are dazzling in colour and cleanliness, within and without, and, one-storied, verandahed, branch from a centre. Looked at from above, from a balloon, they might seem half a white starfish thrown up from the ocean.

Avis wore a white veil; but Dr. Outram, trained in observation and more than ordinarily observant of her, noticed the sadness and fatigue upon her face—noticed them resentfully. As a man deeply interested, he resented interests of hers that were beyond him; but he acknowledged inwardly that it was best so. Had her fancy been disengaged and her mood of the melting kind that afternoon, he would have presumed upon it to offer her his great ambitions, his considerable powers of realising them—his poverty. The average feminine woman presents to man an approbative smile, an encouraging question, an appreciative comment; she makes

social things easy for him. Avis made things easy for no man; but whereas her commanding vitality attracted him, her imperious temper protected her against his attack.

This afternoon she was not imperious; she was indifferent, withdrawn, gentle. Robert Outram realised that he could never offer her anything. In what touches the material, he had always known her use and expectation to be richer than his own; he saw now that the emotional touch also was not for him. He rode by her side in silence. His horse was quiet; so ordered for Eddy's sake, who had regard to his own stiff muscles. The accompanying carriage, following a little behind, gave them no conversational aid; they avoided each other's dust, that was all.

Outram remarked upon the curious dry vegetation of the sandy seaboard—the ti-trees, the epacris, the grotesque stunted banksias, which seem to the unaccustomed eye to have been devised as a background for the demon scene of a vast pantomime.

Avis hoped he was taking in a store of heat to fortify him against London fog, and recommended New Zealand as a revelation in vegetation. The northeaster blew them along, the sunlight was consuming. The fence of the hospital enclosure came in sight, and the white gate with the name painted large upon it.

"I wonder how my friend Benmonica likes his billet," said Outram, with an effort.

"Benmonica! What a curious name!"

"A Jew, of course; three years my senior at

Bart's. Clever fellow with a phthisical tendency. He came here for his health. Lucky to get this, though it seems a little remote."

"Everything is remote in Australia, outside the cities. But you can make your life where you please," answered Avis.

"Of course, and I believe he does good work here. The place is a model of what such places should be; and there is the sunshine, and that magnificent blue sea ——"

"Oh yes," said Avis; "one could be very happy here, I'm sure."

As she spoke she resumed in her memory the impression of days of an awful desolation of sunshine. As he spoke, Outram realised a little what that desolation might be; for the born Briton, born among the tender melancholy of brooding mists and soft rain, there is no sorrow so uncomforted as that under a glare of tropical sun.

The Bengoughs drove up, and the party gained entrance to the hospital. Dr. Benmonica, a frail figure with an eager air, took them round his wards. He was an enthusiastic hygienist, sceptical as to the good of drugs, coquetting with the heresies of homœopathy and hydropathy. He confessed to a longing for the strong intellectual friction of the Old World, but declared that "Practice College—Practice College—is the only school for real learning." Practical were the details of the hospital, and most complete. Cleanliness and utility everywhere; light and air and water; beds and boards and nothing else to speak of; no harbour-

age anywhere, so far as human foresight could prevent, for the most insinuating germ.

"I don't wonder that people like to be ill in their own homes among their own familiar dirt," said Avis to Outram. "It's enough to make one die of despair, all this blazing cleanliness! Isn't it a penance in convents and such-like places to sit opposite to a white wall and do nothing—a penance that results in idiocy? I'd rather be in my own dear cabin, on my own well-known rags, with my own dear pigs and fowls running in and out, stifling with my own peat smoke, and unresistant to my own fleas——"

"You have not only yourself to consider," he answered, laughing.

"I am no socialist," she replied.

"You are a heathen Chinese," he returned.

As the visit drew to an end, Benmonica addressed Mrs. Bengough on a sudden thought:

"There is a fellow-countryman of yours—a fellow-countryman here; admitted yesterday to the lazaret, I am sorry to say. Would you like to see him? Nothing distressing yet, though the mind is evidently dulling a little from the general tendency of the disease."

Lucia Bengough was known for deeds of kindness.

"Poor fellow! Let me see him, then. Where did you say he was admitted?"

"He is in the lazaret—the leper lazaret. We don't allow visitors there except by special desire. It stands apart, you know."

"How dreadful! I never thought to come so close to leprosy. Have you many sufferers there?"

"This man—I forget his name—makes the eighteenth, and the fourth white man in."

"Let me see, Lucia," Mr. Bengough interrupted, "you say positively, Dr. Benmonica, that there is no risk of infection?"

"As far as our experience goes in these circumstances, or I would not suggest your visit."

"There can be no object in *your* going," said Outram to Avis. He shrank from the idea of nearness between herself and a leper.

"If it's safe for my mother——" she answered.

"To the best of our knowledge and belief, I suppose it *is* safe," he answered. "But you must remember that we know practically nothing about the disease, except that it is slow, dreadful, and incurable. There are terrible sights even there in that white row of cells."

His artifice succeeded with her. Avis liked terrible sights no better than most of us do.

"Stay with me here, then," she said, "and let us ask the matron to give us some tea."

The Bengoughs went with the medical officer across a dividing paddock to the department characterised by Outram as the white row of cells, which stood in an enclosure always carefully locked—a line of neat, one-storied cottages, with the inevitable verandah to the front, upon which all the rooms opened. The lazaret looked over an exercise ground of a few acres of scrub to the unbounded stretch of the Pacific. The rooms were comfortable, assigned

in ones and twos to each patient, and there was a common room where they could meet while strength or inclination permitted. Humanity and refinement had arranged their surroundings, but their imprisonment was absolute.

"First-class misdemeanants for life," said Eddy dryly.

"Did these men sin or their parents?" Lucia returned.

Dr. Benmonica answered her: "I have often asked myself that, thinking of my damaged lungs. But I assure you they are not unhappy. They grumble, of course—sick people, and other people, always do that; but their finer sensibilities are dulled."

They caught sight through a window of a sufferer whose head and face were muffled. A lad, quite young, came out, hearing voices, and nodded to them. His hands were hidden; the skin of his forehead was curiously roughened and reddened. He claimed attention for his pots of flowers and ferns; said he had felt much better lately.

"Only seventeen—a sad case," said the conductor.

"How do they get it?" murmured Lucia, deeply moved.

"How, indeed!" answered the doctor, with a shrug.

They passed along the verandah.

"Here is our man outside," said Dr. Benmonica, and pointed to a small figure under a broad Panama hat which sat in the open, half-way between the

buildings and the sea, as if to catch the full hot ray of the sinking sun.

The basking man took no notice of the sounds of their approach; he sat motionless among the boronia bushes. Benmonica shook him by the shoulder, saying, "Visitors for you;" and a stiff hand was put slowly up to push the hat back from a blotched and wizened face.

"Visitors from Southamptonshire. They tell me you came from there," said Mrs. Bengough sweetly, smiling and trying to recognise him.

The patient knew her after a dazed moment, and started up, showing an agony of fear.

"'Ere's more of 'em!" he shrieked. "They'll cop me at last; I know they will. Mrs. Fletcher, ma'am, don't 'ee say you've come for me. Gawd's treuth, I never touched the stack, nor the barn neither. But appearances was again me, and I took my refuge in flight. I 'ave tried to keep myself respectable, Gawd's treuth I have, in this far country, till my pore 'ands was all spoiled by Bathurst burrs, and not out yet, nor like to be, by what they tell me. Is it like I would lay a match to a stack or barn? Is it like I would do such a thing, and me country-bred and knowing the ruin of it? I was never near to Copping's that night, which I could prove, only a pore man 'as no money for the law, nor friends. You was always good to the poor, Mrs. Fletcher."

Lucia fell back a little under the hysterical onslaught, disconcerted, dismayed. Her husband came a step nearer, and drew her arm within his own.

"What is all this?" she asked. "I can't remember this man. There is nothing to be alarmed about, my poor fellow. I don't even know your name; but if I did, I would do you no harm. What is it?"

He told her abjectly, and shivered in the blaze of the sun, maundering on about his "pore 'ands" and the burrs, and having been in Coleminster for the yeomanry meet on the very day the barns were burnt. Recollection came to her—a vision of burning barns and red smoke rising in an August midnight sky, and a memory of a great local outcry. But it was long ago; harvests had come and gone. She put aside the miserable statement, wishful only to soothe.

"That is all over—years past, Rennard," she said. "No one thinks of you any more, and I shall say nothing about you, I promise you, nor tell any one where you are. I am here only on a visit. I am so sorry about your hands; but if they can be cured anywhere, it will be here, and you have such comfortable quarters. I am so glad to see you in such a beautiful place. This is Mr. Bengough, of Wilsdean. You remember him?"

He peered at all in turn, unreconciled, shivering still, and squeaking incoherently about Copping, who had sacked him unjustly, and Hazell, who had done the same, and their deserts, if such were to be had. Then, turning insolent, he screamed that if his visitors didn't want him, he didn't want them, and wasn't afraid of no man. He had kept himself respectable on both sides of the sea, he had, as all who knew him could say; and that was more than

could be said for all as made quite another appearance.

Lucia turned away to her companions, saying :

“We can do no good.”

“His nerve is gone,” answered Dr. Benmonica. “I meant well; he has had visitors already to-day, and is over-excited.”

They moved away; but she lingered a minute, looking at the superb field of ocean, deeply blue, and the long waves of exquisite green which broke in a foam of snow upon the glistening border of ivory sand.

“A lovely prison indeed,” she said at length, “and peace here to the end.”

Avis and Dr. Outram had been entertained with tea at their desire, and the matron, who gave her leisure to her garden, had taken them outside to see her rock-lilies. But the mind of Avis ran on disease and death, as is the way with visitors to a hospital.

“You must have seen a great many ways of dying,” she said to the matron. “Which is the least dreadful, do you think? Which would you choose for yourself, if you could choose?”

The answer was a shrug of the shoulders.

“Upon my word, I don’t know; they are all bad when you come to the point.”

“Is there no such thing as a peaceful exit, then?”

“Oh, for old people. I don’t say ——”

“A little revolver shot in due season; that is one’s only chance of neatness and tidiness and decency.”

“Neatness, tidiness, decency!” repeated Outram,

laughing; "as if Nature cared about any of them! Nature has no nose—Nature has no eye—Nature has no sense of decency. If you want all these highly artificial attributes, there is much to be said for the non-natural revolver shot; but, in kindness for your friends, choose your time and place for it. Let it be in a cold country, and say in the snow—no decay, no flies!"

"Ugh!" said Avis; and then it seemed as though indeed some kind of charge had struck her.

She was conscious of a violent shock, of a reeling of the world round a tall man in white, whose glance, light-grey and very penetrating, was on her.

He came quickly up, walking with a yellow man in yellow clothes, whom she did not see at all.

Outram, noting the change in her, thought it a sudden realisation on her part of the horrors of death, and sought about for a lighter topic for their talk. Before he found it, the yellow man was speaking:

"We saw the patient, matron, and all the rest of them. I shall remember your permission to come again. Most interesting cases—particularly that of the New Liverpool postmaster."

Outram's attention was gained in a moment. The joy of "cases" absorbed all three. Hazell raised his hat suddenly, as though he had just recognised Miss Fletcher as an acquaintance. She seemed to herself rigid in space, but to an onlooker—and for the moment there was none such—she bowed very distantly.

"I am coming to see you," said Hazell quickly.

Avis felt as though he came closer, as though his concentrated will pressed on her; but force always failed with her, and she was roused to antagonism as relentless to herself as to him.

“Why?” she replied.

He felt the resistance, the impalpable barrier between them. He hurled himself against it boldly.

“Why? Because the something—whatever it is I have no notion; I am absolutely at a loss to conceive what it may be—the something which in your judgment, in your feeling, rose up and divided us, the mystery that holds us apart, this is in the keeping—the sole keeping—of an unhappy man who lies there—just there—in the leper-house, in a living grave! It is buried with him. I dare you to dig it up! It has never existed. I am coming to claim you!”

CHAPTER XX

It was close on Christmas-time. Picnics and family parties were the custom of the season. Sydney was full of Bush people; stations were full of Sydney people. The population of the colony was presumably no greater than usual, but every place in the colony seemed much more full of it.

Caradon Bolitho wrote to Hazell in pure friendliness, inviting him, if he had nothing better in view, to join the large party at Wamagatta.

"My mother always says it takes a multitude to do such evil as the eating of plum-pudding in such weather. You couldn't possibly eat yours alone. Come and make one of our big circle round our big dish."

Hazell, however, did not go. He had but one purpose at Wamagatta, which must be effected within the hour of his getting there, and it was beyond his limit of civility to disturb harmony, and perhaps leave again incontinently within the hour, at the festive time. He asked Dr. Beeby, with whom, in sheer hunger for humanity, he had arranged a queer friendship, if he could neglect his practice and spend a day or two at Burrabindar.

"My practice? Certainly, if you like. I am no slave to my practice."

"Illness postponed till after the New Year mostly, I dare say?"

"Couldn't say that, though there's something in it. Oh no! There's another fellow in my part, a rival—serious rival—no medical qualification whatever. I assure you, they really prefer him to me. He drenches them without fear, you see."

"Ever kill them?"

"Why, yes; but so do I. We run each other very close. I have so bad a reputation for mysterious experiences and private vices that I have almost the charm of a medicine man; but, then, he is so liberal with his flavourings, and has such a grand scale of quantity in his prescriptions."

So Dr. Beeby spent Christmas Day in Hazell's hammock, beatific with morphia, unconscious of heat, flies, thirst, of the throbbing shriek of the cicada, of the irritating darkness of the room.

The squatter looked at him ruefully as he dined alone, wondering whether he had gained much of a social kind from the lank presence in tusser-silk which lay so unresponsive. He forced himself to think of his pastoral prospects. The season was magnificent: there were water and grass in abundance; the stock were in fine condition; Soy Ching was in great content.

Hazell ate his turkey with tolerable satisfaction; then came the pudding, flaming in brandy, to the alarm of the insect contingent. Mrs. Brock brought it in herself with a smile.

"And there's the ring and everything proper in it," she said, with pure self-approbation.

"Beeby, you bilious object, wake up and take your chance of matrimony!" Hazell shouted.

The doctor raised his emaciated head to shake it, and perceived the position.

"The luck of the tribe and the tent to yourself," he answered; "my kingdom is of dreams."

Hazell swore aloud, cut the pudding, and found in his slice the bachelor's button. The discovery affected him sorely. He flung the offending morsel over the recumbent doctor into the garden, and on an extraordinary impulse went to the bureau to write these hasty words:

"DEAR MRS. BOLITHO,

"An anxious man addresses himself to your uncommon penetration, and ventures to ask you a question very important to him. When can he best come to your house to see Miss Fletcher alone? A candid reply to this will tell me much.

"Very truly yours,

"RALPH HAZELL."

It was the most hasty note he had ever written in his life. Mrs. Brock appeared with the cheese, and was astounded by his request that a special messenger be despatched at once to Wamagatta.

"But, dear me, it couldn't be done on Christmas night, not ever so!" she answered. "They're all keeping Christmas, and only myself and Passiflora in the house, and she's going out directly your table is cleared to a tea and bit of a dance down the Creek. Unless it's Soy Ching, who's nothing to boast of on a horse, smoking his pipe at the kitchen-door, there isn't a creature handy. It couldn't wait for the post till after to-morrow, I suppose?"

Hazell laughed with vexation, and waved the matter aside.

"And the doctor," said Mrs. Brock; "won't he eat pudding, neither?"

"No; he's worse than Soy Ching, he won't even smoke a pipe for the occasion. He'll want about a quart of hot milk presently. But he's waking up."

"And did you get anything, Mr. Hazell?" inquired the creator of the pudding archly.

"Nothing," he replied promptly, and reflected afterward with much self-scorn that the kitchen would miss the button and grin over his poor lie.

He burnt the letter, and in a rage shook Beeby out of the hammock, demanding of him some sort of melody for his own heaviness.

"I asked you here for *Christmas*, man," he said, "not for the Commination Service or the *Dies iræ*! At least, let us have some ghost stories."

The doctor demanded hot milk, and thus fortified, delivered himself of his experiences in witchcraft and black-fellows' magic till his host was shy about going to bed.

The New Year came. When the gaieties of it might be presumed overpast, and an unrelated call was decently possible, Hazell summoned up his courage, invoked his gods, and set out to storm the fortress of Diana's heart.

He reached Wamagatta about five o'clock on a burning afternoon, and found Mrs. Bengough only at home. It was a rebuff, but he disregarded it, and asked to see her. She received him in a sit-

ting-room at an end of the house which looked southeast, and so lay in shadow. The room was new to him, but its proper tenancy flashed into his mind, and tingling nerves and leaping pulse acknowledged the intimate atmosphere of Avis. He glanced round. Her violin, her spinning-wheel, her heaped-up writing-table, her assortment of riding-whips, her mother! He bowed with a full heart, and his habitual briskness of speech was exaggerated to abruptness in the words:

"So very good of you to see me. I feel one has no right to make any social appearance when a hot wind is upon us; but I started early, before the unspeakable thing got up and smote us."

"The goodness, surely, is on the part of those who brave it," was the answer, in soft penetrating tones, and the lady rose in stately cordiality to greet him.

Soft silk, cream-coloured, fell about her in pleasant folds, a silver belt confined it easily at the waist, the neck was worked in silver thread, the complexion unalterably fresh, the iron-grey masses piled above the luminous brown eyes, made Juno, stepping downwards on the hill of life, fair to see. The warmth of her hand-clasp touched him yet further. Here was no stranger, here was sympathy and understanding—his mother as well as hers—the eternal mother, whom one meets sometimes incorporate, to one's comfort.

"The drawing-room gets the western sun, and I fled from it," she said. "The others, braver than I, have gone out to amuse themselves by taking

honey from the tree. They said the hill would protect them from the worst of the blast. For my part, the buzzing of bereaved bees would add the last straw to this horror of heat. I have an English prejudice that a wind should be cool and a tree shady."

"A prejudice," rejoined Hazell, "which is, I think, one of our very happiest, as Englishmen. I rank it in value with that of the blessed inexperience of youth that all women are angels. I may say this without offence?"

She smiled. "We have both learnt *worse*," she answered. "I hope you drove under cover?"

"I did nothing so sensible. I rode a tiresome beast—a new purchase—who raised my temperature most unnecessarily by treating me to his particular vice."

"A powerful horse to have any vice left in him to-day. It was a hundred and six degrees in the verandah at lunch-time. What is this vice?"

"One quite new to me. The perverse creature, without any warning, lays his head back, so that no bit has any effect; and, in fact, there's nothing left to pull at or take effect upon; and so he bolts, blindly. Luckily it was on the road, and the road was clear, and after a couple of miles he quieted down. I must ride him with a martingale. They told me so when I bought him, but I thought my—I call it—fourteen stone, Mrs. Bengough, would damp his ardour sufficiently."

"You should not risk your life."

"Oh, there's no one to whom it matters very

much," he answered cheerfully, above the incurable longing.

Children's voices came in at the open window.

"Our successors are playing under the grapevines, getting an appetite for their tea," said Mrs. Bengough, smiling happily in recognition of her son's unmodulated yell. "They are bound in honour not to go beyond the shelter of the trellis; indeed, there's plenty of room for more than three such atoms of humanity—glorious, long, thick vines!"

"I hope they are allowed to eat the grapes?"

"In limits; there are stones. My daughter eats enough for all of them. I should be ashamed to guess how many pounds she disposes of in a week."

"Oh! As a matter of fact, Mrs. Bengough, it was your daughter I came to see to-day. I want her to eat *my* grapes; I want her to dispose of *me*. I have spoken to her already—not altogether unsuccessfully, I tell myself; but something came between us. I am a stranger to you; you may not even have heard my name. Your favour would be of the greatest service to me, but I am afraid I cannot hope to have it on so short notice."

A flush flickered on the face of each as their eyes met. His words were impetuous, and the strong magnetism of the strong man mantled round her as he leaned toward her, his hands opening in involuntary request. A sense of sympathy fell instantly upon him as she answered graciously, with kindling look:

"I knew it, Mr. Hazell, and—you are not so

much a stranger to me as you think. I have heard your name in England. My husband's brother is a soldier. May I say that what I heard commanded my respect? Men make the world so hard for women! Perhaps you realise this. More likely, though, you acted nobly from a noble nature, unconsciously. Perhaps I should ask your pardon for mention of what must be painful to you, but you have come so near to me when you approach my daughter ——"

"I understand, I understand," he said hastily, turning away his head. "And that is over. Until I met your daughter, I thought it never could be over."

"I trust it may be quite forgotten. Most of us, Mr. Hazell, have something to forget." She paused a moment, then continued firmly: "Life has been very bitter for my Avis, but I believe—indeed, I do believe—that she is all the worthier for its bitterness."

He interrupted the earnest, touching speech angrily:

"Oh! I couldn't tell you how worthy I think her! It's not only her beauty, though I am but mortal, and that is much. Do you suppose—have you any reason to suppose—she cares for me at all?"

"Ought I to answer you, I wonder?"

His expression was almost fierce in its demand.

"She did not tell me; but, speaking only for myself, I do suppose she cares."

"Ha!" he exclaimed, with a deep breath, and

leaned back in his chair and looked about the room. His face relaxed into a blissful smile.

Avis Fletcher's mother observed him closely.

"Mr. Hazell," she began, gently urgent, "we cannot make the past of those we love, but I think we love them as they are."

He interrupted her again. He spoke from his own point of view.

"There is *no* past!" he said obstinately. "There is only a future in which I want her for my own. If she will not share it, then"—he clenched his teeth—"there is no future—nothing!" He paused, adding: "Nothing but a dead grind from day to day; the sort of thing I have lived through lately."

She said, as if to herself: "A fiery pair!"

"I have been a soldier, madam. I can stand fire."

Quick feet came along the passage, and Avis, in a white dress and shady hat of white, showed herself in the doorway.

"Well, mamma dear, we got pounds of honey, and only one man was stung," she began. "You don't deserve it, but I ran you off some in my pannikin, and you can go and eat it instantly, in the drawing-room, and make yourself thirsty with gum-sugar." Then, perceiving Hazell, who stood to meet her, the playful words ceased, and her colour changed. He bowed, and suggested, with a laugh, awkwardly:

"Shall we shake hands?"

"With my mother's guest, in my own sitting-room," she answered stiffly, and gave him a stiff hand. "Come and eat your honey, mamma."

Hazell plunged into the midst of things.

"Stay a minute, Miss Fletcher. I have come to see yourself. I cannot go away without a private word with you."

"I have no private words for any one," she answered chillingly; and her mother recognised her father's passion in the instant dilatation of her nostrils and her hardening line of mouth.

"Hear mine, then, please," he persisted.

She turned from him, proud and obstinate.

"Mother, this gentleman and I have had private words already more than once, and I have finished with him. This is persecution."

"Oh, Avis, hardly that, I think! I will leave you both a moment."

Gentleness never failed with Avis, and she yielded to her mother's gentle tone and glance and let her go alone, but took her own place standing by the window, and waited facing him, hostile and impatient, for what he had to say. He looked at her, desperate, and his heart burst into rough speech:

"Avis, I can't live without you!"

"You have managed it so far."

"It isn't life. It never can be life again for me unless you share it."

"Good heavens, Mr. Hazell! How many more times must I refuse you?"

"You *did* care! I swear you did! I could not be mistaken! I think of it continually—your arms, your kiss. No woman could so stultify herself in an instant!"

"*Varium et mutabile semper!*" answered Avis

mockingly. Then rage at the forced recollection rose within her. "I am bound to answer you nothing! As I told you then, I tell you now: Go!"

He would not stir.

"What is there between us? Is it my wretched past?"

"No, you know it is not! Your wretched past is creditable—glorious. Do we not honour you for it, all of us?"

Her mockery cut him, but he stood firm; every mood of hers bound him further, every minute spent with her, seeing her, with her influence upon him, knitted his soul closer to hers.

"What is it, then?" he cried. "I say there is a bond between us at this moment—a bond of body and spirit, that nothing while we live can ever break—that is what there is between us!"

Avis started as though he had struck her. She flung her right hand toward him as though she flung off all reserve, and answered him wildly:

"My own past is a gulf that I will never overstep!"

He came nearer. "*I* overstep it, blindly and boldly! You are not some one else's wife?"

Shaking with the fateful meaning of the words, she gave him up her secret: "No, I am not, and the world said that was my shame!"

"The world—shame! It's *you* I want, love—will have!" he cried, and stepped forward to seize her.

She shrank back quicklier yet.

"You don't understand! Why do you make it so hard for me? The world was right. I ought to have been some one else's wife. I was a child; he died ——"

His eyes flamed. He stood a minute weighing her words, then:

"What do I care for that? I have been some one else's husband."

He caught at her hands, but she drew them away, putting them up beseechingly.

"Ah, but I care for you!" she answered in a voice that thrilled with passion, and her golden head sank. "Leave me." Her voice broke. "Never come here, or I must go elsewhere. Look the other way when we meet. It was impossible unless I told you, and now I have told you, I will never willingly see you again."

She steadied herself an instant by the window-frame, as though she must cling to something, then escaped his reach, passing into the inner room. He could not follow. He stood staring at the emptiness, across which the potent voiceless chords, tense and painful, held him fast to her.

"Avis!" he cried, "Avis, hear me! Don't leave me!"

She made no answer.

"The man is dead, you say," he cried. "That saves me from killing him."

Still silence.

"Well, then, I write it here at your table, Avis, with your own pen. I love you; to me you are pure gold within and without. You love me; I

will worship you. There is no past for either of us. Come to me—only come soon. I cannot tell you what the waiting is.”

She gave no sign of hearing. He left the writing, and went quickly out of the house.

CHAPTER XXI

A HUMAN being of high vitality, without absorbing pursuit, whether of bread or fame, without strong personal demand on affection or service, standing alone, stemming in proper person the purposeful flow of Nature, must ask at bitter intervals, "Why was I born? I fulfil no end. Without offspring of brain or body, why should I live? As well to die at once."

Avis Fletcher recognised herself as indispensable to no one, nor was there anything she did which another could not do as well. She felt no call to ride barebacked for the delight of large audiences, nor to spin clothing for the simple savage. Mrs. Bolitho loved her, but she had sons and sons' wives for her declining years. Her mother loved her—oh yes, in her most unreasoning moments she had no doubt of her place with that wise and tender woman—but her mother's life was rounded and complete with a husband whose look would follow her as she moved about a room, a baby boy who reproduced in his own blooming hazel and brown the eyes and curls of his approving father. Avis, her first-born, represented to her only the heavy trials of a past best forgotten—more, was only a trial still. Hazell loved her, but Hazell must learn through sorrow to forget her. Nothing but distress came to him also through her. Avis told herself that it was her fate to bring sorrow continually to her nearest and dear-

est. She wished them gone, that in absence it might touch them more lightly ; but when they had gone and left her, what should she do ?

Life stretched before her, rayless—a long reach of futile activities, of fruitless regret. She had not known till now that hope of final right adjustment had been at the bottom of her heart, that in her blackest moments the possibility of rectification had given a saving glimmer. Now that she had sent her lover from her for ever, she felt herself entered for the first time into steady despair. Years would blunt the edge of it, of course, and she would ride gradually more slowly under the gum-trees, with calming pulse and shortening mental outlook, and one day her place would know her no more. But it seemed a long route to an inevitable port.

Avis seriously debated the advantages of a by-path. Would it not be really a relief to all concerned to know her permanently gone where the wicked would cease from troubling, where she also would cease from troubling those she loved ? There was, on the other hand, their agony of shock, their grief—which in such circumstances is, perhaps, the greatest—that her own agony should have been found unbearable. Yet why should she live on till her gold grew grey and her firm tissues shrank ? The end was inadequate. She balanced the points at issue coolly. Sad, beautiful words haunted her :

“ ‘ Oh, but thou dost not know

What 'tis to die ! ’

‘ Yes, I do know, my lord :

’Tis less than to be born : a lasting sleep,

A quiet resting from all jealousy,
A thing we all pursue. I know, besides,
It is but giving over of a game
That must be lost!''

The fancy pleased her. The simple melody rang in her ears. The argument almost persuaded her. Giving over of a game that must be lost. Why not? There would be no disgrace in it. We praise those who play a losing game, but they do so with a hope, though it be only by the last stroke, of some glorious retrieval. She had nothing to retrieve.

Her mood, which she thought her own secret, was better understood than she guessed, though it so dulled her perception that she found nothing strange in the fact that she was seldom alone. Mr. Bengough rode with her continually, and his silence was amazingly friendly. When he spoke it was usually with some suggestion of interest calculated to set the mind roaming to far countries or absorbing policies, and though he seemed to give little attention to his companion, he was ever ready with the cheerful, unasked offices of a man whose polite training has been that of a woman he delights to please. In the sultry evenings he would drag her forth with him, each with a gun, to find the dreadful, elusive morepork, whose low, ceaseless cry rasped listening nerves to rawness. The owl, of course, was never found, but Avis slept the better for the search.

Her mother and Mrs. Bolitho demanded her wits in planning out a tour among the South Sea Islands,

and they read aloud from books about them, debating their attractions with those of Japan, showing extraordinary liveliness in the discussion. Mrs. Bolitho, who could share in no prolonged excursion, would declare her jealousy of the project; Mrs. Bengough, without a sign of shrinking, would assure her of the consoling care of Thomas Edward in their absence. The place was full of guide-books. Eddy wrote for an analysis of cocoanut-milk and bananas, which, he stated, provided all that was necessary for the support of life in tropical heat.

Avis did not know how good they were to her. Her stepfather was greatly bored by aimless sojourn in the Bush in the month of January, but he made no moan; he understood—perhaps chiefly from his wife's contemplated parting from Thomas Edward—that much was at stake, and he had not so completely as most men of his age forgotten his own youth and the throes of it. But he found the days monotonous. If he was to be roasted alive, he would rather see something new for his pains. The South Sea Islands, though hotter, would be preferable, and there was nothing like travel—had he not proved it?—for a mind diseased.

They decided finally, one day at lunch, to leave Sydney for Fiji a week later. Avis, still debating the pros and cons of her own violent death, agreed to the trip. Elucidating circumstances might arise in it—fever, a fall overboard; anyhow, for the moment it was pleasing them.

Mrs. Bolitho, in her genial way, sent for a bottle of special wine to drink luck to the voyage; her

husband framed the toast, and added well-known details of well-known heroism with the glass:

"One—just one, and no more, at luncheon, sir. That's what it is to be an old fellow. I remember the days when I could take a bottle of port this time of day and go about my business none the worse for it."

"I never shared your powers, Mr. Bolitho—always had a miserable weak head. Tea suits me best," said Eddy Bengough.

"Head, sir? Like a rock! Steady as my hand! Once only, in my recollection, did I take—I won't say, you will observe, too much, because I confess I generally took what you young fellows nowadays would call too much—but more than I could carry. It was a December day, most bitin' cold. We were huntin' the Devon and Cornwall. I had made an early start, almost before it was light, and had ridden nine or ten miles to the meet at Black Wilmin'ton; and ridin' and knockin' about and kickin' our heels all the morning, by one o'clock we found ourselves——"

"Why, here's Caradon! It's not his day! Can he want lunch?" interrupted Mrs. Bolitho, as her son appeared on the verandah. She had heard the tale a thousand times before. Avis and the Bengoughs also must know every point of it. "Come in, my dear," she continued. "What will you have?"

The young man, in coat and breeches of white linen, entered through the window and bowed to the company, wiping his brown face.

"I'm too hot for contact," he said. "Tea, please,

mother—biggest cup you've got. I don't mind about eating anything. I see you take tea, Mr. Bengough."

"Old Bushman," was the answer.

"Yes. Thanks, mother. I say, do you people here know anything about Hazell—Hazell of Burra-bindar?"

The name, so near their thoughts continually, startled them all but the old host. Involuntarily, fearfully, Mr. Bengough glanced at Avis, whose hand clenched itself round the fork she held.

"Well," resumed Caradon, getting no reply, "I take it you don't know. It seems he's lost."

"Lost! How can he be lost? Do you mean Bushed?" demanded Mrs. Bolitho hurriedly.

"Bushed! Come to grief somehow—disappeared. Went out as usual yesterday morning, riding that brute Marzipan (brute that smashed up Farren, you know) without a martingale. Didn't come home to dinner—nobody's business, of course. Didn't come home all night—no fuss made by any one: had been known to stay somewhere all night before this, and turn up in the morning to give an account of himself. This morning, about nine o'clock, one of the riders discovered Marzipan, saddled, reins broken, taking his ease in the Jericho paddock, about a mile and a half from the house. No sign of Hazell. Horse quite cool. Nothing to show how long he had been there, nothing to show anything. Search began. Four men out. One of them sighted me in our run—Curraing Paddock—and came up to ask if I knew anything. I came on here."

"God bless my soul! Why, anything may have happened!" said Mr. Bolitho, keenly interested.

His wife glanced at Avis, who looked bleached and stony. The tone of her hair was discordant with her face; her eyes were toward her plate.

"Sunstroke?" queried Eddy.

"Not likely," answered Caradon. "Oh no! That brute Marzipan——"

"Mr. Hazell is a fair horseman, surely?" said the soft, penetrating voice of Mrs. Bengough.

"Good enough," replied the young man, "but not good enough for Marzipan without a martin-gale. He's the most eccentric brute—got a trick of laying his head back on his shoulders, and bolting for all he's worth. Farren had him before—feather-weight, Farren; smashed up. Heavy-weight, Hazell; thought his weight might handicap him a bit."

"There are worse tricks than bolting with a heavy-weight," said Mrs. Bengough.

"Depends on what part of the country you are in," replied Caradon, regardless of Avis. "Burra-bindar is only half cleared, and when you can't steer, and your horse is going anything over twenty-six miles an hour——"

"Yes, yes, most certainly! By Jove! most likely some bough crack your skull for you, clean as a whistle!" said Mr. Bolitho. "Yesterday, you say, my boy?"

"Yesterday, sir."

Silence fell on them, while Caradon drank a third cup of tea. His mother for once had no word for the occasion. As her husband said, anything might

have happened ; the circumstances—a bolting horse, rough forest land, a heavy man, long hours of delay, a fierce sub-tropical sun—formed for each one of them a mental picture uniformly disastrous for Hazell. Into the mind of Avis's mother there flashed a fearful recollection, that of a summer afternoon in the drawing-room of an English vicarage, where a beautiful sullen girl sat unregarding, and a tall, thin clergyman, his aristocratic features grey with nervous shock, threw himself into an armchair and asked for brandy. He had seen, he said, a young man carried home dead, his head hanging horribly. He shuddered as he named the fellow. A restive horse, he said. The girl rose with a cry which still rang in her mother's ears, and fell to the ground. There was no cry to-day. The girl was a woman, and had learnt silence. She rose from her seat. Her mother rose, too, and with a face of awful tenderness, hurried to her. Avis needed no help to-day ; her step was firm. She passed them all like one answering a call in her sleep, her dark eyes to the front. Perhaps the past urged her. She went out ; she shut the door behind her.

Mr. Bengough, watching them both, rose too, and took his wife's arm gently. At his touch her countenance changed, and, before them all, tears rained down her cheeks.

"My word ! what have I done ? What's wrong with Avis ?" Caradon exclaimed. "Does she care for Hazell ? I fancied—Pheenie fancied—she had refused him."

"Oh, hold your tongue, dense son of mine!" his mother addressed him, almost screaming. "You have done mischief enough for one day!"

"It couldn't be—again, Lucia," said Eddy firmly; "the gods don't do such things."

"Oh, Eddy, who shall say?" she answered him wildly. "The ways of death and the ways of life repeat themselves innumerably!"

Mr. Bolitho looked from one to the other.

"I beg of you all—I don't understand, I am afraid. What's come to us all? Is this poor man dead?"

"Spencer! Don't you see? For Avis's sake we pray not!" cried his wife.

The old gentleman considered a full minute.

"Ay, ay! Is that so indeed? Dear me! dear me! Poor girl! poor girl! Most shockin' news for her. Caradon, my dear, it seems to me you've blundered very considerably."

"Well, sir, I really didn't think of her at all," was the reply, given in gloomy protest. "I believed she had refused him months ago."

"Don't harp on that, for goodness' sake!" said Mrs. Bolitho. "Is there nothing in the world but asking and having?"

"I'd leave her for a while—I would indeed," Eddy advised her mother. "She won't do—anything—till she knows the end, either way. You have nothing to suggest that she cannot suggest for herself. I'll go round soon and ask her to ride out with me and look about a bit."

Caradon, lighting his pipe, was heard to mutter

some statement about women and the modes of them. Mrs. Bolitho leaped upon him.

"Women, forsooth! And are men so different? What if some one rushed in blurting that Pheenie had broken her neck?"

He turned upon her furiously.

"Mother!" he roared, "there's no doubt where I get my blundering tongue from!"

A yell from the verandah informed them that Thomas Edward was awaking from his midday nap. Mrs. Bengough stepped out to take him up and kiss him. Her husband, glad to escape from the heavily-charged atmosphere of the went, came with her. Suddenly, with his gaze on the white grass-lands beyond, he exclaimed:

"There goes Avis! She has forestalled me. I'll bet you anything she goes to search for Hazell!"

Mrs. Bolitho limped from within and approved.

"A splendid girl! I'd have done it myself!"

Mrs. Bengough, watching the rapid figure going into the distance, thought a dozen issues out, and feared at all of them. The elder woman guessed her fears. She touched her hand imperatively, saying:

"Dear Mrs. Bengough, there's only one thing to do. Drive over with your husband to Burrabindar, and wait for her. I shall be here—you there. Our Avis may defy the world!"

CHAPTER XXII

AVIS went to her room and put on her riding-dress. She provided herself also with a flask of strong brandy and water, a trustworthy pocket-knife, matches, and a couple of large silk handkerchiefs. She had to prepare for unknown needs. She moved with extraordinary quickness and precision ; her senses seemed sharpened to a fine point—a far-distant sight, small, clear, as through opera-glasses reversed, of Hazell, lying helpless, dead or injured, in the desolate Bush. It was a sight, an hallucination, a delusion, perhaps, which absorbed her whole being. She could say no word, stir no muscle, think no thought, that did not bear upon it, lead her to his relief. She went to the stable where Hajji awaited her pleasure. He received a mechanical caress. He was no longer her darling ; he was merely the best means for her purpose, and she was vaguely conscious of satisfaction that he and no other was in the stall. She saddled him, and started away at a free canter through the Wamagatta paddocks, making for the spot, eight miles away, where they touched a narrow projecting slip of Burrabindar. Not that he would be found there, but that it would be so much to tread his own ground—so much the nearer !

The afternoon was intensely hot. Her khaki habit was heavy upon her ; the leaves of the white

box-trees were ashen in the glare. No cloud flecked the depth of burning blue above. The sheep were gathered in any trifle of shade; the bloodless herbage was of a waxen white. Only here and there a disgusting iguana, scuttling round a trunk, was brisk in the general torpor.

Avis looked to neither side. Her face was pale in the shadow of her hat, with introspective eyes and drawn nerves about the lips and nostrils. She thought intensely, but it was one thought—Hazell lying helpless. She was driven irresistibly; but it was not consciously love or anxiety which drove her, rather a cord was fastened closely round her heart (she felt its constriction), which drew her ruthlessly toward him, wherever he might be. Misunderstanding, anger, bitterness had no more existence; to go to him, that was all. Who shall say that a magnetism had not compelled her into his presence on the evening when they met first? That a tie had not stretched between them thereafter through all their disagreements, and that now one inner self, in dire necessity, stripped of social accidents, did not grapple the other to him with hooks of steel?

Once on Burrabindar, perplexity intruded. The news of his disappearance had given no clue of direction. He might be fallen on any spot in all his sun-drenched leagues. There were creeks which might hide him among coarse grass and rocks; hill-tops that might hold him up to the brazen sky; flats, badly cleared, where a solitary searcher might wander at length among a confusion of timber.

She had no knowledge of his customary round, nor any notion but the roughest of the lie of his land, nor any idea of what work he might be at the moment particularly overlooking. But her horse was tireless; her eye was trained by years of riding through gum-forest. Every sense was sharpened, and there was the strange constraining cord which, as though his hand held it, must guide her rightly.

Impatient of gates, she took the boundary fence, glanced round, gave a premonitory cooe, and strained to catch a reply. By and by an answering cry reached her. She followed it, and found a rider searching like herself. There were three others out, he told her—had been out since morning, soon after the grey was found and the alarm given. All the paddocks within five miles of the house had been examined. The other men were now following the several creeks to the confines of the run; there remained the further ridge yet unexplored. He would take the one end of it, if she would perhaps take the other, and they might meet along the top.

Suddenly she remembered to have heard Hazell say he liked the view from the extreme spur of the range. She raised her whip toward it.

"Yes, I will go there," she said.

"It's a climb, but your horse is fresher than mine," he said.

He told in the tavern afterward that she spoke in a voice like a knife, and sat her animal in one piece.

It was a new experience for Hajji; always before, harmonious though they were, there had been

between him and his mistress a consciousness of two pieces, mutually appreciative, giving and taking, with demand and response. To-day he was the instrument of an inflexible purpose. He had merely to obey. He accepted the position: he bounded like a wave with her across the burning grass, and tried the hillside cheerfully.

The sun sank as they climbed, spreading his usual cloudless transparency of crimson, and the leather-heads quavered to each other in the tree-tops. No coolness fell upon the earth, which breathed out its own heat, and lay impervious in it.

Hajji's neat feet made many a slip among the loose stones; his sides heaved without undue urgency, yet he knew his best pace was required of him. There was no yielding in his rider; still steady demand. But Avis felt her quest was nearly over; dead or alive, her lover, her beloved, was close at hand. Up the weary limestone slabs, steep, slippery, clinging to the pommel, swerving from the boughs, her glance about her everywhere, precautionary, but the magic cord still drawing at her heart; up to the top, arid, wind-swept, grown only by a poor small gum and native cherry, with rough soil, marked by sheep-walks and their traces, with sharp stones piercing through the thin layer of mould, with an enormous view to the wide air, the horizon-bounded pastoral!

Hajji stood quivering with trembling legs. Avis looked along the ridge running northward; it was serrate and irregular, heaped with boulders, a series of small summits of the unkindest and most brist-

ling sort. Way along them was taken on the small foothold of their abrupt sides, or over their rugged heads; and wherever available depth of earth gave place for roots, impeding trees grew and stretched stunted arms for the discomfiture of rider or walker.

A horse accident here! Must she not find him dead? She cooed loud, repeatedly; silence answered. The cord tightened; its constriction rose to her throat, and every fibre of her body became tense. Her eyes seemed to strain with it, and felt *colourless* in her head, as though the veins of her brain were empty. She knew that her irides were pale and her face white; a chilly pricking sensation ran under her hair. Invisible girders propped her up stiffly in the saddle, and unconsciously she rounded Hajji to the line of the ridge, and, stumbling, he picked his path where there was none. A few slow yards, and he stopped short, terrified, planting his forelegs wide, jarring her violently. Before them from behind a heavy wall of slab, a man's brown riding-boots, scarred, motionless, projected, horribly incongruous. Life stood still in her a second, then she slipped down and tottered forward, holding to the slabs, realising nothing, forced to meet the horror, whatever it might be. Hazell lay hatless, his eyes closed, grey-visaged, his beard and temples hideous with rusty stains. With a dreadful cry she sank upon his breast and entered into darkness.

Such things are out of time. Presently some one enfolded her, and a tremulous, dim voice said:

"You!" It was her lover's voice; it pierced her darkness. Death was past then, and they were together in the beyond. She did not stir; there is no hurry, one thinks—*there*. Presently shaking hands crept about her face and neck, weak and unskilful. The sunset chill touched her brow, vivifying; with a pulse of agony, life returned to her from its suspense. She raised her head to find it bare, with its golden growth mantling her shoulders, and his fingers in it; and out of the shrunken grey, his eyes alive upon her, and the stained beard quivering with a smile. She flung her arms up, circling the wounded head, and her cry rang out:

"Are we not in the for ever and ever, Ralph?"

"Yes," he said feebly; "oh, yes!" And again his arms enclosed her gently.

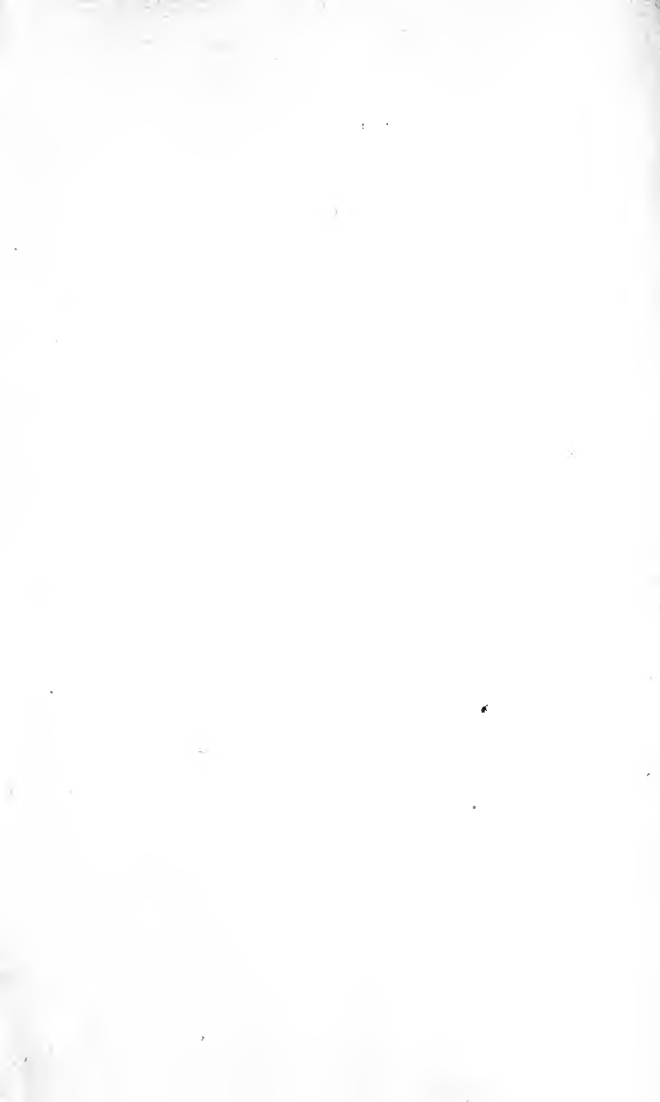
As they waited in the darkness, his confused and aching head pillowed softly, his cold hand clasped in hers, his broken leg propped at the least agonising angle, they agreed to part no more. While he should be ill, as he must be, she must care for him; if he were to die—twenty-four hours' pain and fasting bring the strongest to some thought of death—she could spare no other moment of his dear society. The understanding made in few words, for his shaken brain was unready, they waited even happily.

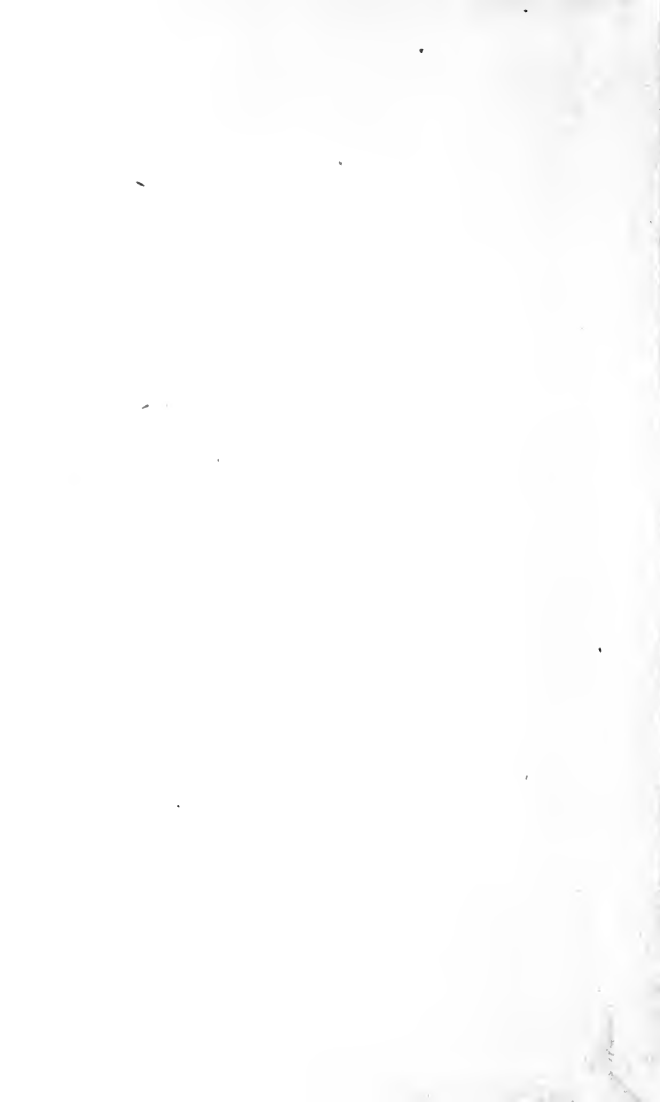
In course of time there came relief, and the long torture of getting him down the hillside and so home. As the dawn broke, he was free of surgical attendance. He turned his exhausted face toward Mrs. Bengough, and, looking at her imploringly,

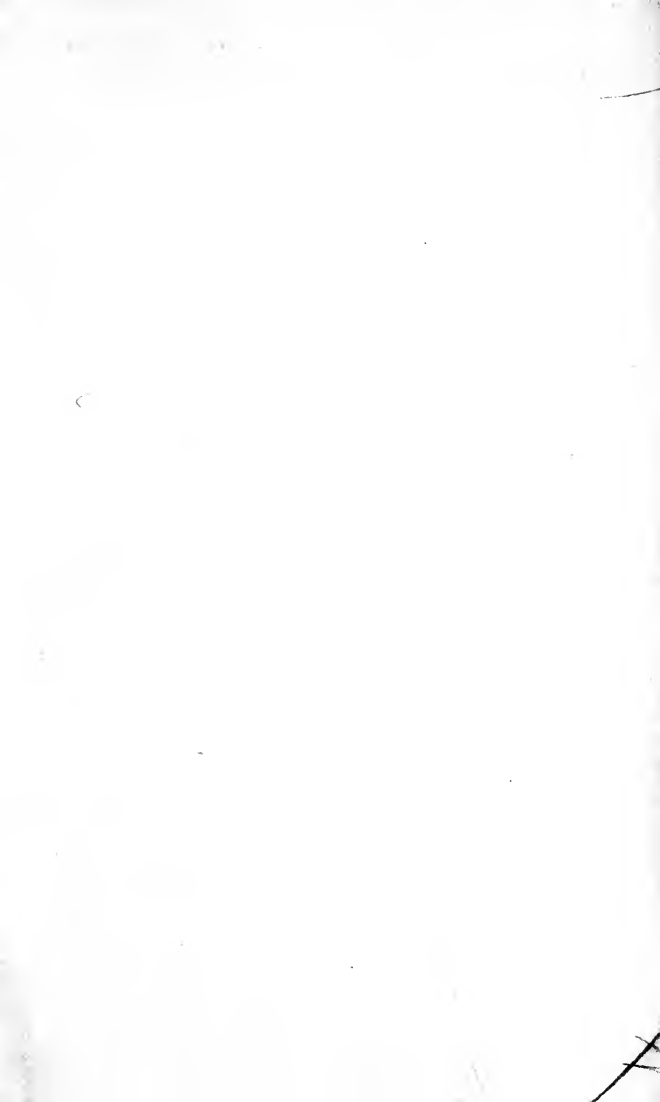
sought words to ask for what was in his heart. She brought her daughter with a smile, and took a hand of each and placed one in the other. So, through deep waters, Ralph and Avis Hazell entered into the haven where they would be.

THE END.









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